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週に一度クラスメイトを買う話

～ふたりの時間、言い訳の五千円～

ファンタジア文庫

Story About Buying My Classmate Once A Week

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Parts 1 to 176 are collected from Angela, and parts 177 to 397 are collected from Bjones.

Chapter 1

Sendai-san is Worth Five-Thousand Yen, No More, No Less (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 1

There's no reason it had to be Sendai-san. It could've been Ichio-san, or even Gotou-san. Heck, a stranger would've done just fine as well.

But even so, it must've been fate that led me towards choosing Sendai-san… Well, if only that were the truth. In reality, it was nothing more than a coincidence. It was all thanks to a series of coincidences, combined with my whims, that ended up bringing Sendai-san to my room.

Once a week, for three hours of her time.

I'd pay her five-thousand yen for it.

That was the sort of contract we had.

Well, I say that, but it wasn't like anything was set in stone.

Sometimes, I'd pay five-thousand yen for two hours of her time, and other times, it'd be three-and-a-half hours. There were some weeks where we'd only meet up once, but there have been times where it'd be twice. Basically, the amount of time we'd spend together and the number of days we'd meet up in a week were quite flexible. The only thing that remained unchanging was the amount I paid her each time. Anyway, regardless of the length or how frequently we'd see each other, the fact was, I was buying Sendai-san's time for the price of five-thousand yen.

Plain and simple.

「Miyagi, hand me the sequel to this.」

Sendai-san, who was lying on my bed, said as she tapped me on my shoulder.

I turned around to face the bed I was just leaning against and noticed she'd been tapping me on my shoulder with the manga volume that she'd just finished reading.

It was already December, and today happened to be ridiculously cold, so I kept a space heater running in my room in order to combat the freezing temperature. However, it seemed that it was too hot for her, seeing as how she'd already taken off her blazer. She'd also loosened her necktie and was lazing around while wearing nothing but her blouse and a short skirt, which made her look quite sloppy. It felt like, if you really wanted to, you could easily peek up her skirt.

At school, Sendai-san had a reputation for being neat and proper, so I bet if any of our classmates saw her like this, they'd immediately become disillusioned with her.

「Go get it yourself.」

I said, with an indifferent look on my face, as I pushed the manga volume – labeled as volume three – back towards Sendai-san.

Her position on the school caste was only a step below from the very top.

Even if Sendai-san removed the subtle amount of make-up that she typically wore, she'd probably still hover around the upper-middle level of the caste. That's how beautiful she was. She was also quite smart to boot. If I remembered correctly, her grades were considered one of the highest.

That was probably what made her so popular in the first place.

—— At least, that was what I imagined. The reason why I say that is because I'd never actually seen her popularity in action before.

She could be described as a "normie" who belonged to the higher levels of the school caste – though it would be more accurate to say she sat at the lower end of the upper ranks. Well, in any case,

she stood out among our classmates, so it wouldn't have been unusual for her to be deemed popular.

「You're so mean. Can't you just get it for me?」

Without warning, Sendai-san stretched her arm out and dropped volume three straight onto my thighs.

「Hey, what exactly do you think I am?」

「The person that's closest to the bookshelf.」

「Just go and get it yourself already.」

I said coldly as I placed volume three onto my pillow.

Considering my place in the school caste was somewhere near the bottom – probably second from the bottom, if I had to guess – if we were in school at this moment, I wouldn't have the audacity to speak to Sendai-san as arrogantly as I have been.

I was only able to because we were in my room.

Because I paid Sendai-san five-thousand yen for her time.

On that note, I had no idea why she agreed to being rented by me so easily. Since it was Sendai-san we were talking about, if she wanted to, I'm sure she could've gotten ten-thousand or even twenty-thousand yen without issue.

As long as she flaunted her high school girl status, with her good looks, she definitely would've been able to find someone who'd be willing to pay that much for her.

So, for someone like me, who could only be described as average both in appearance and intelligence, having the chance to keep Sendai-san all to myself like this is something that would usually never happen. Because of that, I consider the time we spend together to be incredibly valuable.

「Oh, alright, fine. I guess I just have to grab it myself.」

Sendai-san grumbled as she rose from the bed and walked over to the bookshelf. She sat down in front of it, mumbling to

herself as she started searching through the books.

「Where's volume four?」

Her long hair was styled in a half-updo, with braids framing both sides and gathered in the middle at the back. Although her hair leaned more towards brown in color than black, the teachers didn't seem to take issue with it, even though it was technically against school rules. This leniency was likely due to her neat appearance and well-kept hairstyle, which diverted the teachers' attention from reprimanding her. Not to mention, her impressive grades might've also contributed to why she wasn't cautioned.

That said, I find it unfair to have to live in a world where showing favoritism is accepted.

I got up and then flopped onto my bed.

It wasn't like I wanted to be Sendai-san or anything, but I had to admit, I was a little envious of her.

I had submitted the wrong assignment to our teacher today, and they got mad at me for it. I bet if it were Sendai-san who made the same mistake, she wouldn't have gotten scolded.

「Wait a sec, Miyagi. Volume four's not here. You should've told me earlier that you don't have it.」

Sendai-san – who enjoyed the privilege of a more laid-back high school experience than most – shot me a displeased look.

「It's there somewhere.」

「It's not.」

「It has to be there.」

「I'm telling you, it's not here.」

Her insistence causes me to retrace the steps in my memory.

I could clearly remember the release date of volume four.

However, I couldn't say for certain if I actually bought it or

not.

「I know volume four started going on sale last week, so I could've sworn I bought it. Oh well, I guess I forgot.」

I mumbled to myself while making a mental note to go and pick up a copy tomorrow.

When I buried my face into my futon, I noticed a pleasant scent that didn't belong to me, which kind of got on my nerves.

「You actually look up the release dates?」

「Yeah, I do.」

「What a nerd.」

「Shut up.」

I raised my head and looked over at Sendai-san.

It wasn't like Sendai-san said anything particularly rude. I could tell it was just banter, but still, all it did was make me feel even more annoyed.

When I looked out the window, it was already starting to get dark. The lights in the other apartments were starting to turn on as well.

Night was approaching.

I went over to close the curtains and sat back down onto my bed.

I wasn't exactly having a good day today.

If anything, I'd say my feelings were about as dark as the sky right now.

「Sendai-san. Come take a seat over here.」

I called out to Sendai-san, who was still hanging out by the bookshelf.

「Is it time for your order?」

「Yep.」

I stared at Sendai-san as I crossed my legs.

Although my uniform's skirt was a little longer than Sendai-san's, it was still considered shorter than what was accepted by school rules. Unlike Sendai-san, however, I didn't have nice, slender legs that I could flaunt, but there was nothing I could do about that.

「So, what do you want me to do?」

Sendai-san asked as she sat herself down in front of me.

I uncrossed my legs and quietly said,

「Take this off.」

I placed my right foot on her thigh and pointed at the navy-blue sock I was wearing.

「Sure, sure.」

「Don't give me that. Just say "sure" once.」

「Sure, sure.」

As if she had no intention of obeying that last order, she intentionally replied with "sure" twice as she took off my right sock.

「The left foot too?」

She asked.

「No, leave it. Now lick it.」

When I poked her stomach with my bare foot, Sendai-san shot me a dubious look in return.

「You mean your foot?」

「Yep.」

I'd been paying Sendai-san five-thousand yen for her time since summer, but today was the first time I'd ever given her an order of this magnitude. Usually, I'd just ask her to read me a book or do my homework or get her to do other trivial things along those lines.

For five-thousand yen, Sendai-san will do anything that I tell her to.

To me, that was the most important part, so it didn't really matter what I got her to do for me. That was also why I never gave her any "real" orders to obey. But today, I wasn't really in the mood to order her to do something inconsequential.

I wanted to give her an order that she would be unwilling to obey.

However, I hadn't anticipated that after adhering to only the most trivial commands until now, Sendai-san would actually comply.

「…… Alright.」

She hadn't agreed to it immediately, but contrary to my expectations, Sendai-san accepted it nonetheless. There wasn't a hint of emotion in her voice as she placed her hands on my ankle.

Sendai-san stared intently at my foot.

I felt a shiver run down my spine.

A warm breath brushed against the top of my foot as she gently lifted it up.

And then, I felt a soft sensation.

Sendai-san's tongue touched the top of my foot.

The five-thousand yen I would always pay Sendai-san in advance acted as chains tightly binding her to me. She couldn't defy me.

That was the nature of our arrangement within this room, and she effectively carried out her duty.

Sendai-san is Worth Five-Thousand Yen, No More, No Less (II)

Part 2

After my foot received a single stroke from her tongue, Sendai-san raised her head and asked in a quiet voice,

「Is this good enough?」

Whenever I was having a bad day, I would let myself have my way with Sendai-san.

That was what I'd decided ever since we started this sort of relationship.

And since I wasn't exactly having a great day today, I wasn't going to let her off easy.

「Nope.」

It wasn't like I was trying to punish Sendai-san or anything, but it wouldn't be any fun if I let her off the hook with just one lick. I mean, it wasn't every day she agreed to such a ridiculous request like this. I hadn't meant for things to get this far, but now that they have, it'd be a waste if I didn't at least indulge in it a little more.

「How much longer do I have to do this for?」

「Until I say it's enough.」

「You pervert.」

Sendai-san mumbled, knitting her brows.

As expected, she looked completely unamused, but it didn't matter to me if she was having fun or not. The most important part was keeping me entertained.

「And your job is to listen to what this pervert tells you to

do, Sendai-san.」

I shot a grin at her as she remained seated on the floor.

The space heater continued to blast hot air into my room, prompting Sendai-san to loosen her necktie even further. She had already removed her blazer earlier and left it laying around somewhere else. The first two buttons on her blouse were undone, exposing a hint of her collarbone.

Sendai-san let out a small sigh.

And then, just like a dog or maybe even a cat would, she began licking my foot.

Her sticky tongue gave off a wet, warm and soft sensation. It felt like we were doing something incredibly indecent.

If I owned a pet and they started licking my foot like this, I'd think it was adorable. But the reality was, it wasn't a dog or a cat licking my foot right now – it was another human being.

I wouldn't say Sendai-san's appearance was on the same level as the models you'd find in magazines, but her face was very well-proportioned nonetheless. That being said, the thought of someone else licking my foot made me rather uncomfortable. I wasn't exactly a fan of having my skin caressed by the tip of another's tongue.

「Miyagi, are you enjoying this?」

Sendai-san asked, raising her head.

「Well, in a way, yeah.」

I didn't find joy in the act of having my foot licked by someone else, but it was entertaining because Sendai-san was the one doing it.

That same Sendai-san, who stood out among our peers and was favored by our teachers, was now licking my foot.

She was licking the foot of someone as ordinary and unremarkable as myself, just like a servant would.

The thought of that alone was enough to lift my spirits.

「So you actually find this fun, huh? In that case, while I'm at it, should I make it feel good as well?」

While saying that, Sendai-san placed her tongue by my big toe and gradually made her way towards my ankle. The warm and moist sensation of her tongue caused my hands to curl into fists. I could feel knots forming in my stomach as I clenched my teeth together.

「Don't do that.」

I answered curtly while pulling on Sendai-san's bangs. Gently pulling herself away, she responded with, "Quit it," while still gripping my ankle.

Her somewhat long nails began to dig into my skin.

Using my index finger, I poked Sendai-san on her forehead.

「Don't do anything unnecessary.」

I rebuked her. In return, all she said was, "Fiiine," and her grip around my ankle loosened.

Her tongue made its way back to the top of my foot.

Without hesitation, she casually started licking it again.

I had no idea what was going through her mind.

In fact, I'd always thought of her as someone that was impossible to read.

If I were in her shoes, I'd never be able to lick someone else's feet, and yet, here she was, doing it without raising a single complaint.

I doubt she was doing it for the money.

But if that wasn't the reason, then what was?

Well, I suppose there was no use trying to figure out what

was going on in the mind of someone as outstanding as her.

「I wonder what your friends would think if they ever saw you doing something like this, Sendai-san.」

I asked her.

Her group of friends weren't exactly the type of people I'd typically interact with. They were always so radiant, and they seemed like they were always having fun with each other, as if they were making the best out of every moment of their school lives.

「Instead of worrying about me, I think you should be more concerned about yourself. If anyone stumbled upon a scene like this, I don't think there's a single person who wouldn't agree that you're acting like a lowly pervert, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san retorted coldly as she raised her head.

If this were to be exposed at school, my reputation would probably plummet to rock bottom. No doubt, the normal school life I was used to would come to an end.

But the same would happen to Sendai-san. If they knew that she was busy licking the foot of someone as utterly unremarkable as myself, her position would start to crumble as well.

That's why, it didn't matter to me if I became known as a lowly pervert or not.

After all, that made Sendai-san the companion to that same lowly pervert.

「Don't worry. I know that blabbing about what we're doing here at school is a violation of our agreement, so I won't say anything.」

That was one of the rules we came up with when we first started.

There were a few rules we established when I first got Sendai-san to agree to letting me do whatever I wanted with her for five-thousand yen, and one of them was that whatever we did together after school stayed strictly between us.

It was like a secret game just for the two of us – one that nobody else would ever see. Of course, that also meant neither of us were going to tell anybody else about it.

「Well, more importantly, less talking and more licking.」

I lifted Sendai-san's chin with the instep of my foot.

She narrowed her eyes.

She glared daggers at me, as if she had something she wanted to say.

In fact, that was probably the first time she'd ever shot me a look like that ever since I started paying her five-thousand yen.

Seeing this act of rebellion from her sent tingles down my spine.

Not that I was actually planning on listening to her or anything, I thought I would at least grant her the right to speak.

「If you have something you want to say, then I'll let you get one word in.」

I said, staring back at her while my foot continued to prop her chin up.

Sendai-san is Worth Five-Thousand Yen, No More, No Less (III)

Part 3

「Using violence is a breach of contract.」

Sendai-san was referring to the rules that we established together.

That being said, there was no way using my foot to lift up her chin could ever be considered “violent”. And since I haven’t done anything that has gone against the terms of our agreement, there was no reason for her to call me out on it either.

「This isn’t violence.」

「Yes, it is. You just kicked me.」

She replied, sounding displeased as she flicked my big toe with her fingertips.

「All I did was touch your chin.」

If she was getting this worked up over something like that, I could only assume she was just trying to act bratty.

「Hmm…」

Sendai-san mumbled under her breath. Her grip around my ankle tightened even more than before.

She didn’t seem convinced.

She glared at me.

Sensing that something bad was going to happen, I tried to pull my leg away, but Sendai-san refused to let go. Instead, she pressed her lips against the top of my foot and began to suck on it.

The sensation felt completely different from just having her tongue stroke my foot, and caused my body to tremble.

「Stop it.」

When I raised my voice, trying to get her to stop this thing I hadn't commanded her to do, my words fell on deaf ears. Now grabbing onto the sole of my foot, she bit down on my big toe.

「That hurts.」

Her teeth were firmly planted into my toe. It felt like she was about to break skin, though just barely. My voice filled the room, but that wasn't going to relieve me of the pain.

「Sendai-san, I told you to stop.」

When I looked down, I could see the shape of her hair whorl.

In protest, I grabbed Sendai-san's head and shook it.

「This is an order, so stop it already!」

I said, raising my voice to a volume I'd never used with her before. She removed her teeth from my toe, then ran her tongue against it, as if checking to see if she managed to leave any bite marks behind.

My toe felt wet and sticky.

The warmth of her tongue sent chills down my spine.

As I thought, human tongues really were disgusting. That being said, I came to realize I didn't actually dislike this. As if doing so could dismiss those feelings, I tugged on her hair.

「Stop that.」

Upon repeating the same words that I uttered earlier, at last, Sendai-san lifted her head. Finally regaining ownership of my leg, I pulled it up towards the safety of my own bed.

「Give me your leg. I'll put this back on for you.」

Sendai-san said with what appeared to be a satisfied smile on her face as she picked my sock up.

Why was she the one giving me orders now?

I felt nothing but dissatisfaction at this situation.

「You don't have to put that back on. Just take this one off too.」

I said, placing my left leg on her thighs. She obeyed silently.

「Any other orders?」

「No.」

I replied curtly as I stood up.

「Want anything to drink?」

I asked, noticing that the cup on the table was empty. She answered back with a simple, "I'm good."

「Want something to eat for dinner then?」

"I'm going home."

I already knew that was what she was going to reply with. I mean, I'd asked her that question many times before, and each time, I was met with the same answer, so there was no way she would respond with something different this time. Plus, it'd be such a pain if she actually accepted my offer.

Yet, for some reason, for the first time ever, I heard her answer with, "I'll have something to eat."

Still barefoot, I put on my slippers and led Sendai-san to the kitchen. I grabbed a couple cups of ramen from the shopping bag I got from the supermarket and started boiling water on the side.

I brought the cups of ramen over to the other side of the bar counter, where Sendai-san was seated, and placed them right in front of her with the lid flaps open. Upon seeing this, a confused look appeared on Sendai-san's face.

「What is this?」

「Cup noodles. Can't you tell just by looking at it? Don't tell me you're so rich that you've never seen cup noodles before?」

「If I was so rich that I'd never seen cup noodles before, I'd probably be attending some school where the students greet each other with, 'Salutations', instead of going to our school, wouldn't I?」

Although Sendai-san sounded dumbfounded as she spoke, I've heard her family was rather well-off.

Not that she flaunted around a lot of brand-name goods or anything, but the products she did own were pretty high quality. She has probably never had ramen served to her for dinner before either. Her dinners were definitely homemade meals.

Sendai-san seemed like the type who was loved by her family.

If it weren't for us being classmates, I'm pretty sure there was no way we'd ever have any opportunities to speak to one another.

—— I started feeling nauseous.

I stared at the electric kettle that was currently boiling enough water for the both of us.

「Besides, I've had cup noodles before. Oh, wait, don't tell me, is the Miyagi family not well off?」

「I get enough allowance to afford renting you for five-thousand yen once, sometimes twice a week. But if you consider that poor, then I guess I'm poor.」

Though Sendai-san spoke teasingly, I gave her a curt answer.

Although my household was the kind that had no reservations about serving ramen for dinner, that wasn't because of financial issues or anything. Rather, if I had to say, I'd think we were more well-off than not.

「… I guess you're not poor, huh. So, is this all we're having

for dinner?」

「If you'd rather have a bento or something, I can go buy some. Or do you just want to go home and have dinner there? I'm fine with either.」

I didn't have a mother.

Plus, I didn't have any talent for cooking.

Those were the only two reasons why I sometimes had cup noodles for dinner.

While there were single fathers out there who could cook, most of them were so busy with work, it was extremely rare for them to be able to get back home before their children went to sleep. Perhaps my father felt guilty for subjecting me to that sort of home life, so he wanted to make up for it by giving me an allowance that was clearly too much for a high school student.

「I'll just have this.」

Sendai-san fiddled around with the cup lid until the water in the electric kettle finished boiling.

We poured the water up to the fill line.

Then, we set a timer for three minutes.

After that was done, we began to slurp on our ramen.

Whether I ate cup noodles alone or with someone else, it didn't change the fact that cup noodles were still going to taste like cup noodles. But somehow, this felt a lot better than just eating by myself.

「Thanks for the meal. It's getting late now, so I'm going home.」

「Okay.」

I had nothing to talk about with Sendai-san.

We didn't belong to the same friend groups, and we didn't

have anything in common either.

Because we had nothing to talk about, the two of us had eaten in silence. Since a serving of cup noodles was only so big, we finished our meal in no time at all, and before I realized it, Sendai-san was about to head home.

「If you decide to buy the fourth volume, let me read it.」

Sendai-san, who went back to my room so she could retrieve her blazer and coat, said as she glanced over at my bookshelf.

「You'll probably be able to read it the next time you visit.」

「Okay, guess that means next week then.」

"I'm never coming back again."

Given what happened earlier today, I couldn't even blame her if she said something like that, but it seemed that she was planning to visit again.

Sendai-san was such a weird person.

Even though she was normally so diligent at school.

I tried to hold back those disrespectful thoughts I was having about the girl who followed my orders as I handed over her blazer and coat.

「I'll see you off.」

As usual, we left through the front door together and made our way to the elevator. After getting off on the first floor, we walked towards the entrance.

「Alright, see you later then.」

Sendai-san waved without stopping.

「Bye-bye.」

I called out to her from behind as she went off into the distance.

I wondered, even when we become third-years next year and ended up in different classrooms, if Sendai-san would let me continue renting her for five-thousand yen.

While pondering that thought, I got back onto the elevator.

Chapter 2

Miyagi Hands Me Another Five-Thousand Yen Bill Today (I)

(Sendai PoV)

Part 4

The shelf in front of me was stocked with magazines full of photos of idols and models plastered all over the covers. Among them, I picked up a magazine that had particularly flashy letters on it.

I guess this was what Umina was talking about earlier… probably.

The reason I was so unsure was because I was only half-listening to what she was talking about.

I mean, what can I say?

I stared at the magazine in my hands.

Aside from the displays of mix-and-matched outfits, there were also superficial headlines advertising clothes that were apparently sure to make girls popular with the boys, as well as miscellaneous tips on how to improve oneself.

Honestly, there wasn't a single thing I liked about this.

I'd rather wear clothes that I actually wanted to wear, and I could always worry about self-improvement later. If I was going to read a magazine anyway, I'd much rather read something lighthearted than some shallow looking fashion magazine.

But the truth was, I was only reading these types of magazines for the sake of friendship, and I had enough pocket money from my monthly allowance to spare anyway.

In order to have a successful school life, you had to play your

cards right. For example, in my class, it was absolutely necessary to suck up to Ibaraki Umina. Actually, I suppose that was a bit of an exaggeration, but at the very least, you had to make some kind of conversation with her and then play along with what she says.

Umina was my friend who was quite flashy, though she was a bit lacking in the brains department, and she belonged to the upper echelons of the school hierarchy. She was known for having a short temper, so if you ever dared to cross her, you'd just be creating trouble for yourself. However, as long as you appeased her and stayed on her good side, you were basically guaranteed a comfortable school life among the upper ranks.

That's why buying this magazine – something she'd recently started getting into – was what I guess the adults would call a "necessary expense".

There were plenty of people who might call me a people-pleaser, but it didn't matter to me, they can say whatever they want to say. They were probably only saying that because they were just jealous anyway, so I let it be.

Since I came all this way to the bookstore, I decided to look around a bit. After a short while, I ended up picking out a novel I wanted and headed towards the cash register. There wasn't even a line or anything, but I still waited for my turn before bringing my books out to the counter.

According to the display on the cash register, the total came to one thousand something yen.

I reached into my bag and searched for my wallet.

「Huh?」

My wallet, my wallet…

The wallet that should've been there… wasn't.

I distinctly recalled putting my phone into my bag this morning.

But what about my wallet?

No matter how much I looked around, it just wasn't there.

I might've left it at school.

Actually, no, it was probably sitting at home.

I had no recollection of putting it into my bag whatsoever.

When I snuck a glance at the lady working the counter, I could see she had a skeptical look on her face.

Uh oh, I had to do something.

「Ahh, umm…」

It was a little embarrassing, but I had no choice but to put the books back.

「These books—」

「I'll pay for them.」

「Huh?」

Before I could finish my sentence, a hand reached out from behind me and placed a five-thousand-yen bill on the counter.

「Sendai-san, use this.」

When I turned around, I was met with the sight of a girl wearing the same uniform as me.

And what's more, she was someone I recognized.

Not that we'd ever talked before or anything, but she was a familiar face I saw every day.

「… You're Miyagi, right?」

I was pretty sure I got that right.

As the resident people-pleaser, at the very least, I managed to commit everyone's family names to memory. Well, I couldn't quite say the same about first names, though.

「Use that money to pay for your things.」

Without confirming whether I got her name correct or not, she repeated what the five-thousand-yen bill was for.

「No, it's okay. I'll just feel bad if I do.」

「Don't worry about it.」

No, I'm going to worry about it.

I wasn't exactly keen on the idea of borrowing money from a girl I hardly knew. I disliked the idea of being lent money to begin with, and I certainly didn't want to spend someone else's money just for the sake of buying a magazine that I only wanted in order to appease someone else.

「No, take it back.」

I grabbed the five-thousand-yen bill from the counter and handed it back to Miyagi, but all she did was put it back down again.

「Um, may I use this to complete your order?」

The clerk asked, clearly looking troubled.

「Yes, please do.」

Miyagi answered in my stead.

But I seriously didn't want to borrow money from her.

I tried to snatch up the five-thousand-yen bill again, but the clerk managed to beat me to the punch as she quickly slipped the bill into the cash register.

In the end, I was left with the magazine, the novel, three one-thousand-yen bills and some coins.

「Thanks, Miyagi. Looks like I forgot to bring my wallet, so you helped me out there.」

I expressed my gratitude to her once we stepped away from the cash register.

Although my protests fell on deaf ears earlier, I ended up using her money anyway, so I felt like I had to bow my head to her, albeit reluctantly.

However, she said nothing in return. At the very least, since she didn't correct me on it, it seemed that her name really was "Miyagi".

「Here, take your change. I'll pay back what I used tomorrow.」

I tried to return the money the clerk handed to me earlier, but for some reason, Miyagi wouldn't accept it.

「You don't have to pay me back. You can keep the change too.」

After saying her piece, she turned around and started walking off.

「Huh? Wait a second, I feel bad.」

「It's okay. I really don't need it, so you can have it, Sendai-san.」

「I can't just take this from you. Let me return it.」

「Just throw it away then.」

「Throw it away?! This is money we're talking about!」

I caught up to Miyagi, who was walking away rather quickly, and grabbed her by the shoulder.

I'd never spoken to Miyagi at school before, so I never realized that her head had a screw loose, maybe even several. I mean, no normal person would ever suggest throwing away money like this. And to begin with, a phrase like, "You can keep the change", was something only corporate executives would say, not high school girls.

And besides, the fact that she thought I was the kind of person who would just be like, “Oh, sure, thanks!”, in response to keeping the change really got on my nerves.

「Ahh, whatever. Let’s just say I borrowed the change as well. I’ll just give it all back to you tomorrow.」

To be honest, I was really starting to get angry, but I held myself back.

If rumors of me yelling at someone else started circulating around at school, it’d only serve to ruin my image.

「There’s no need for that. You don’t need to pay me back.」

Shaking my hand off her shoulder, Miyagi began to walk away again.

She exited through the automatic door.

Chasing after her, I called out to her from behind and said:

「I’m going to pay you back. I’ll give you five-thousand yen at school tomorrow.」

「Then how about you work to pay off that five-thousand yen instead?」

Her response came completely out of left field and took the conversation in a totally unexpected direction. I involuntarily stopped in my tracks.

「Huh? Work?」

「For the time being, walk with me to my home.」

Miyagi, who had been brisk walking up until now, stopped and turned to look at me.

「Huh? Wait, wait, hold on. I just said I’d pay you back tomorrow.」

「If you’re not going to come with me, then just keep the money.」

Miyagi quickly turned on her heel.

What's with her?

Seriously, what's wrong with this girl?

I cursed Miyagi in my heart.

I didn't want to accept five-thousand yen from her, but I also didn't want to do any work for her either.

But at this rate, Miyagi was about to head home, and it didn't seem like she had any intention of accepting a repayment from me. Even if I slid the five-thousand-yen bill into her desk, I'm sure it'd just turn back up in my possession somehow.

Seriously, what a troublesome person she was.

As a sigh escaped my mouth, I looked up towards the sky. Grey clouds were beginning to roll in. Since the rainy season was already over, I hadn't brought an umbrella with me. After heaving another heavy sigh, I heard Miyagi say:

「I've got some umbrellas at home.」

「Ahh, whatever. Where's your house? Is it close by?」

I didn't want any rumors about me borrowing money from Miyagi to start circulating around, and I most definitely did not want rumors of me yelling at Miyagi and forcing money on her to start cropping up either.

So, whatever, I guess I'll just work for Miyagi for today.

And so, I reluctantly followed after Miyagi.

Miyagi Hands Me Another Five-Thousand Yen Bill Today (II)

Part 5

We kept walking, and walking, and walking.

The two of us walked along in silence.

I wasn't good at dealing with silence.

If I was going to be around someone else, I at least wanted us to have something to talk about. Being shrouded in silence made me anxious about whether I did something to offend the other person or not. Well, not that I cared if Miyagi was angry or anything, but I still wanted to know what I did to upset her. That's why, I wanted her to say something, anything, but she kept her mouth shut the entire time.

Come on, have some awareness and talk already.

I tried sending her my thoughts telepathically, but as you'd expect, Miyagi continued to stay silent as we walked away from the bookstore together without exchanging any words.

Honestly, I should've just gone home.

I shouldn't have even considered going to Miyagi's place at all.

As we walked underneath the gloomy sky, the quietness gave me enough time to regret my hasty decision from earlier. Then, we arrived at what appeared to be an expensive-looking apartment building.

No wonder she was so willing to chuck five-thousand yen away.

The apartment building was so luxurious I couldn't help but think that way. It was also a lot closer to where I lived than I

expected. It was probably only a fifteen, maybe twenty, minute walk away? For some reason, it never really crossed my mind that one of my classmates could live so close to me.

But when I thought about it, that should've been obvious.

We bumped into each other at the bookstore, and her home was within walking distance from it, so it was no wonder she lived not too far from me.

「I live on the sixth floor.」

Miyagi said as we got in the elevator.

「Is that so?」

I wasn't going to tell Miyagi that I lived close by.

I mean, there was no reason to go out of my way to mention it. Plus, Miyagi and I hardly even knew each other, so there was no point talking about it either.

The display on the elevator went through the numbers four, five, and then six as we approached our stop. I followed Miyagi out, and she led me toward the door at the far end of the hallway. She opened it and welcomed me into the front entrance.

「Feel free to take a seat anywhere you want. I'll bring you something to drink.」

「Oh, you don't have to.」

Her room was about the same size as mine, perhaps even a little bigger. That being said, it was quite spacious for a high school student. Her room was neat and tidy, her bed was on the larger size, and her shelf was lined with a ridiculous amount of books.

As I approached the bookshelf, wondering what kinds of books it had to offer, the door swung open. When I turned around, I saw Miyagi setting down cups filled with clear liquid on the small table.

「Do you like to read manga?」

I asked while staring at the spines of her books. Miyagi replied with a curt, “I do,” before suddenly following up with an exclamation:

「Oh, I know. Maybe I’ll have you read me a manga. Sendai-san, come sit over here.」

Saying that, Miyagi rose from her spot. When she saw that I was still standing in front of the bookshelf, she came over to tap me on the shoulder and said, “Go over there.”

As I wondered when we’d get back around to the topic of me “working” for her, I sat down by the table and picked up the glass of liquid she brought for us earlier. Upon taking a sip, I could feel bubbles fizzing in my mouth. I put down the glass, now aware that the cup was actually filled with sugary soda.

I wasn’t a big fan of carbonated drinks.

I couldn’t imagine anyone in my friend group serving soda like this. As I was thinking that, Miyagi took a seat across from me.

「Here, read this.」

She handed me a manga that had a picture of a handsome looking boy and a meek looking girl on the cover. When I skimmed through the pages of the book, I could immediately tell that this was a story about romance.

Was she giving me five-thousand yen just to read this?

I had no idea what went on in Miyagi’s head.

In any case, since I was given the instruction to read it, that’s what I did. As I flipped through the pages of the book, Miyagi, sounding unamused, said,

「No, not like that. Read it with your voice.」

「So you want me to read it out loud to you?」

「Yeah. This is the job I want you to do for five-thousand yen. Or rather, I guess it’s an order from me.」

「So I'm not just "working" anymore, I'm obeying orders?」

「Yep.」

I had no idea when it changed from "working" to "obeying orders", but I'm pretty sure there'd be no point in asking. Miyagi probably wasn't thinking too deeply about it anyway. If anything, if I had to guess, it was something she just came up with on a whim.

「Well, I don't care if you want to call it "work" or an "order" or whatever, but you're telling me that you're paying me five-thousand yen just to read you a book?」

At this point, I wanted to go home as soon as possible, so I quickly moved the conversation along.

「Yep. But you have to read it until the very last page.」

「Okaay.」

Well, reading manga out loud was a simple enough task.

All I had to do was go through some back-and-forth dialogue and utter a handful of cheesy and shallow lines like, "I love you", or, "You're the only one for me."

To be honest, I would've died inside if she had asked me to read her a novel instead. Fortunately, manga didn't have nearly as many words in them, and the story progressed a lot smoother. However, I'd soon regret how lightly I was taking this task.

「…… Isn't this book a little, you know, erotic?」

I briefly stopped reading to flip through the pages ahead to double-check, but no matter how many pages went by, the characters were naked in pretty much most of them.

If I had to say, the bedroom scenes probably took up over half the book.

And on top of that, the dialogue was filled with suggestive lines and various moaning noises.

The content was intense, to say the least. Not to mention,

Miyagi was the one who told me to read it out loud too. What was going on in her head?

It wasn't like I disliked erotic things, but I didn't want to read them out loud. Or rather, I'm pretty sure most people wouldn't want to either. I will say though, I was surprised that a plain girl like Miyagi took interest in these sorts of things, but I was too busy wallowing in regret to really acknowledge it.

「Yep, it's erotic.」

Miyagi replied casually.

「And you still want me to continue reading it out loud?」

「Read the whole thing aloud.」

「Don't tell me, are you into listening to erotica or something?」

「I'm not. I just couldn't think of any other order to give you.」

「Is there even a need to give me an order? You could've just taken your change back, let me return the difference, and then we would've been done with it.」

I had no idea why she wouldn't take her money back. Miyagi was so troublesome. Stubborn and difficult to deal with, too.

「I don't really care about the five-thousand yen, and I don't want you to give it back either. Now, hurry up and read it.」

Miyagi – who really didn't seem to care about money at all – said while rushing me.

Not that I had an obligation to play along with this farce or anything, I really didn't want to accept five-thousand yen from her. Plus, I'd already promised that I'd work to pay it off, so I was determined to see it through until the very end.

Right, I was a pretty troublesome person myself.

「—— Fine.」

“Do it more.”

“I’m coming.”

“Ahhn～”

Etcetera, etcetera.

An endless stream of words that I never wanted to say flowed from my mouth, causing me to feel lightheaded.

Honestly, what was I doing?

Miyagi and I were just two people that belonged to the same class. We’d never even spoken to each other before. So, just what was I reading in front of her right now?

Seriously, Miyagi’s such an idiot.

There was no doubt about it. She was a perverted idiot, through and through.

If I remembered correctly, her grades were——

Actually, how were her grades?

I didn’t know much about Miyagi.

「Sendai-san, your voice is too quiet.」

As my concentration wavered, Miyagi reprimanded me.

「This isn’t something that should be read loudly, you know?」

「Don’t worry about that. No one else is home today anyway.」

Okay, maybe it’s alright for you, but definitely not for me.

Today was the worst. I got so unlucky.

I couldn’t find my wallet, and now I was being forced to read

some erotic manga.

While firing complaints one after the other in my mind, I continued to release moaning noises and recited all the lines. The only thing I could use to quench the thirst in my throat was the cup of soda that I didn't even want to drink.

「I'm surprised by how bad you are at this. Or rather, I guess you sound stiff. I thought for sure that you'd be better than this, considering how often you must get around.」

「Okay, for the record, I'm pure in that regard, and I don't "get around".」

I corrected Miyagi on her rather rude assumptions of me.

「You say that, but you're only passing yourself off as pure because it gets the guys, right?」

「That's not it.」

I wasn't acting pure at school for the sake of attracting men. I was doing it to impress our teachers.

「But I've heard people say you only act that way so that you could hook up with guys.」

「So that's the kind of image I give off, huh.」

I never knew that people like Miyagi and her group of friends thought of me that way. And wait, there were rumors like that about me floating around? I didn't like the sound of that.

「Well, anyway, are we done with the orders?」

I asked Miyagi. For the time being, I put the matter regarding those horrible rumors about me aside.

「Yep, we're done.」

「Okay, then what now?」

「You can go home, or you can stay if you want. You can do whatever you'd like, Sendai-san.」

「Alright, then I'll just go home. Oh, and can I borrow the other volumes of this manga? It was pretty interesting.」

The spine of the book labeled it as the first volume, so there was probably a second one out there. I wasn't interested in reading it aloud again, but I was pretty curious about what was going to happen next. However, just when I thought I'd get a positive answer, Miyagi's discourteous response betrayed my expectations.

「No.」

「Wow, how stingy. What's wrong with lending me some manga?」

「Five-thousand yen.」

「What? Are you charging me five-thousand yen to rent one manga volume? At that price, it'd be much cheaper if I just bought it myself.」

「No. I'll be the one paying you, Sendai-san.」

「Huuh?」

Her words caught me completely off guard, causing me to involuntarily let a silly sound escape my mouth.

「I'm saying I'll pay you five-thousand yen to buy your time after school, Sendai-san. So if you want to read the continuation, then you can do it here.」

The idea of buying a classmate for five-thousand yen sounded too surreal.

Earlier, she had no reservations about giving me some ridiculous order to read erotic manga out loud to her. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if she told me she was after my body.

「I'm not going to sell myself. And besides, what would you even do if you did rent me? Have sex with me? Isn't five-thousand yen a little too cheap for that? Plus, I'm not really interested in another woman's body either.」

I wanted to shut that proposal down before she could even bring it up.

「What are you even imagining, Sendai-san? I have no intention of doing anything like that with you either.」

「Well then, what? What were you going to do with me for five-thousand yen?」

「We'd only be meeting up once, maybe twice a week. I want you to come to my house after school and then listen to what I tell you to do, just like today.」

Miyagi looked at me without so much as a smile on her face.

「You mean like read you an erotic manga out loud?」

「That, and if I feel like it, maybe I'll have you do my homework too.」

「What's with that? So you want me to be like a handyman?」

Well, I didn't like the idea of selling my body for five-thousand yen, but getting paid that much to do someone else's homework was kind of dubious as well.

That being said, it seemed like a good price for that amount of labor.

「No, it's a bit different than that. I'll be issuing you orders, and you have to listen to them.」

「What kind of orders? I don't want you to hit me, and sex is completely out of the question.」

I seriously had no idea what went on in Miyagi's head, so I couldn't predict what she may say next. That's why, just to be safe, I wanted to reiterate that I would not sell my body to her.

「I don't like violence either, and I'm not looking to get into a sexual relationship with you, Sendai-san.」

「If I said no, would you go and ask someone else do to

this? 」

「 I wouldn't. Anyone would think I'm a weirdo if I just randomly went up to them and asked them to do my bidding for the price of five-thousand yen, wouldn't they? 」

Wait a sec, I'd say the current situation we're in is plenty weird already.

Plus, I'd already labeled Miyagi as "a dangerous person" in my head.

But it wasn't like it didn't interest me at all. I was the kind of person who did things like read magazines I didn't even like for the sake of fitting in and buttering up other people. I felt like, compared to that, the current situation would lead to something much more interesting.

「 So you're saying you only want me? 」

「 I wouldn't go that far. Things just happened to work out this way. 」

「 Well, good enough for me. In that case, just to help me pass time, I'll listen to one order for five-thousand yen. I can't come on weekends, but after school is fine. 」

If things "just worked out" for you, then I'm going to make them work out for me as well.

I wanted to avoid reading erotic manga out loud again, but that seemed like that was as bad as the orders could get, so I guess I could go along with it every once in a while.

And besides, I was also a little intrigued by Miyagi.

I wanted to know what sort of orders a strange girl like her would give me. Plus, if I really didn't want to obey an order, I could always give her the five-thousand yen back—— but I suppose she probably wouldn't accept the money.

「 Alright, that's that then. Oh, and I won't interact with you at school, so is it okay if we just communicated through our phones? 」

「That's fine.」

Although I had a hunch that I would probably regret this later, I casually accepted Miyagi's offer.

And then, after exchanging contact information with her, I left her room.

Once we were outside the apartment building, with Miyagi courteously seeing me out, I waved goodbye to her and headed back home.

It wasn't raining anymore.

When I glanced up towards what used to be an overcast sky, I noticed that the clouds had already dissipated without me realizing it.

Miyagi Hands Me Another Five-Thousand Yen Bill Today (III)

Part 6

Our short winter break had come to an end, and I found myself in Miyagi's room after attending the opening ceremony.

The reason for that was because she had summoned me.

I was only here because I had agreed to play along with the whole "obeying orders" shtick; though, at the moment, I was just lazing around on her bed.

She had handed me five-thousand yen the moment I entered her room.

And since then, I found myself with some free time on my hands as I awaited her orders. At first, I didn't like having to search for things to occupy myself with, but now, I felt more at ease being here than at school.

I had already finished reading pretty much most of the books that were on her shelf by now, and at this point, I felt comfortable enough to just curl up on her bed with one of my favorite manga.

「Sendai-san, what did you do over winter break?」

Miyagi, who was leaning against the bed, asked without even a hint of emotion in her voice.

「I did some studying.」

That wasn't a lie.

In preparation for the entrance exams, I enrolled myself in a short-term course at a prep school over the break. Meanwhile, in between studying sessions, I would make time to meet up with Umina and the others to go for pancakes or shop for clothes together, so I was busy pretty much all throughout my winter break.

「Did you get any studying done, Miyagi?」

Her grades weren't bad, but I couldn't say they were great either. I was often asked to do her homework for her weaker subjects.

「I didn't.」

「Did you finish all of your homework?」

「I did, but I wish you'd done it for me.」

「But I couldn't, because it's against our agreement to meet outside of school days, right?」

「Yeah, I know.」

After heaving what sounded like a disappointed sigh, Miyagi started reading her manga, and our conversation ended there.

Well, it wasn't like she and I had anything in common anyway.

At first, I tried talking to her about things like school, TV dramas and magazines, but Miyagi didn't seem interested in those topics whatsoever. All she would do was nod along to whatever I said or respond indifferently, so eventually, I just gave up. Searching for suitable conversation topics with Miyagi was like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

Eventually, I realized that whenever we couldn't continue a conversation, there was no point in trying to force one along. In these last few months, I learned that it was okay to just leave it be if nothing more needed to be said.

After the room fell silent, I took off my blazer and threw it off the bed.

Perhaps because Miyagi was sensitive to the cold, her room was always hot.

I proceeded to loosen my necktie and undid the first button on my blouse.

Just as I'd flopped back down onto the bed and picked up my manga, Miyagi called out to me.

「Come over here.」

「Are you about to give me an order?」

「Yeah. Come take a seat over here.」

Miyagi stood up and pointed towards where she had just been sitting.

What was going to happen next?

Honestly, I already knew the answer without her having to tell me.

I got off the bed and took a seat in front of it. Then, as if I had no idea what was coming, I asked,

「What do you want me to do?」

「Take this off.」

Miyagi, who was now sitting on the bed, commanded as she placed her foot on my thighs.

She had said exactly what I expected her to say.

Sometime around the end of December, for the first time ever, Miyagi gave me an order that was somehow even worse than having to read erotic manga out loud to her. Though, the next time we met up was right before winter break started, and she had only asked me to organize her bookshelf for her. However, it seemed like today, she wanted me to lick her foot again.

Her foot, which seemed to have a healthy complexion, was situated right in front of me. I pulled off her sock and caressed the sole – a part that was usually covered. When I ran my fingertips along the ball of her foot all the way to her toes, I could feel her trembling slightly.

「Lick it.」

Perhaps because she didn't like having the sole of her foot stroked, Miyagi spoke in a low voice.

「Okay.」

I gave a simple answer as I placed my hand against her heel.

I brought my face closer and then pressed my tongue against the top of her foot, which was slightly cold to the touch.

I had no idea what was going through Miyagi's head, but I always thought of feet licking as a pretty niche genre to be into. We started with a live reading of an erotic manga and somehow ended up at feet licking. I never would've guessed that this was what Miyagi was like just based on what I'd seen of her at school.

She was plain, didn't stand out, and I could barely even remember her name. If I hadn't forgotten my wallet on that day we were at the bookstore, we probably would've gone our entire lives without even speaking to each other.

And yet, here I was, licking the foot of a girl like her.

It may have been soft and smooth, but it didn't taste good at all.

Well, it was only natural that it didn't, considering we were talking about a human foot here. That being said, it wasn't like I hated this.

I ran my tongue up from the base of her toes all the way to her ankle.

I went slowly, taking my sweet time doing so.

Then, I lifted my head, looking up to gauge Miyagi's reaction.

She looked like it felt really good.

Her cheeks were slightly red.

It was the same last time as well.

After I licked her foot, her breathing had turned somewhat ragged, and her cheeks were flushed.

She probably wasn't even aware of it herself.

「Keep going, Sendai-san.」

Without giving her a reply, I dug my teeth into Miyagi's toes.

I bit down, making sure it was hard enough that I would leave tooth marks behind.

As if she were resisting, Miyagi shook her foot around as she grabbed me by my head.

「Stop it. That hurts.」

I released my hold on her, just like I was told to do. I could hear her releasing a quiet breath.

The first time she asked me to lick her foot, I bit down on her toes out of pure defiance.

Technically, I hadn't disobeyed her orders.

But still, when she told me to lick her foot, it felt like she was looking down on me, and it didn't sit well with me.

That's why I bit her back then.

But this time, things were different.

This time, I did it because I found Miyagi's reactions interesting.

The sound of her hoarse voice – whenever she told me that it hurt or commanded me to stop – made my own body temperature rise.

Her legs trembled ever so slightly.

Perhaps that was because she was afraid I would bite her again.

This was the side of Miyagi that I had wanted to see again.

Probably because she was now wary of me, I felt her flinch when I put my tongue on her toes.

And then, I pressed my lips against the top of her foot.

Upon planting a few kisses there, I felt her pulling on my hair.

「Sendai-san, quit it. That's gross.」

She was glaring daggers at me.

Her pulling on my hair didn't really hurt though.

「Really? Doesn't it feel pretty great?」

「It doesn't. It's disgusting.」

She released her hold on my hair.

Although Miyagi furrowed her brows, her cheeks were still flushed.

I was oddly fond of her face.

It wasn't like she was amazingly cute or anything, but if I had to say, I guess she could fall under the cute category. She probably would've looked even prettier if she had a little makeup on, but she didn't seem like she was interested in things like that, which I thought was a bit of a waste. I wasn't going to go out of my way to tell her that, though.

I kissed Miyagi's foot once again.

Her breathing sounded normal as far as I could tell, so perhaps the reason why her cheeks were so flushed was actually because the room was hot. Still, the expressions I saw on Miyagi's face were different than usual, which was enough to make me think that maybe licking her feet wasn't so bad after all.

「Lick it properly.」

She kicked me gently on the shoulder.

「Hey, violence isn't allowed.」

Even though it didn't hurt, I put my hand to my shoulder.

「Lick it.」

Miyagi said, repeating herself.

I brushed the top of her foot with my tongue again without saying anything.

She probably thought she was the one giving me orders, but in reality, all of this was only happening because I was letting her do so.

I was the one in control of the situation.

If I wanted to, I could defy her at any time.

I could simply just end our arrangement and walk straight out the door.

But I was here because I felt more comfortable being in Miyagi's room than at home.

I continued to run my tongue along her slightly cold instep.

I brushed my lips against her wet and sticky foot.

Miyagi's leg trembled a bit.

Most likely, when we become third years, even if we ended up in different classes, Miyagi would continue summoning me and paying me five-thousand yen like this, and I would continue to accept it.

It wasn't like I was doing this for the money, though.

I just wanted to continue seeing the self-satisfied look on Miyagi's face whenever I obeyed her orders and led her to believe that she had power over me. That's why, I was willing to keep her company and play along with this silly farce for as long as we were

still high school students.

I mean, we were probably going to end up in different universities, and this would all be just for now anyway.

Considering that our arrangement had a time limit on it, I felt like I was getting a pretty good deal.

I parted my lips from her foot and let out a short breath.

Then, I sank my teeth back into Miyagi's ankle.

Chapter 3

Sendai-san's Sweetness is a Lie (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 7

I didn't like going to school, nor did I particularly hate it.

But it didn't matter whether I liked it or not, I still had to go either way. I didn't really want to attend classes today, but I came anyway. Besides, my reason for not wanting to come to school was something trivial.

My bangs were too short.

I sighed while standing in front of the bathroom mirror.

My hair was only around shoulder-length, so I didn't feel the need to cut it, but my bangs had started getting in the way. Because of that, I decided to give them a trim myself, but I ended up cutting off a bit more than I intended to.

I knew that even if I pulled on my bangs, it wouldn't magically make them grow longer.

There was no use crying over spilled milk, so I had no choice but to accept it.

Though I say that, every time I managed to catch a glimpse of my short bangs, I felt a little gloomy. And whenever I was feeling down, there was only one thing I wanted to do.

『Come over today.』

The text I sent was the same every time.

Usually, I'd send it after second period or around lunch break, but there have been times where I'd send it right after school. However, no matter when the message got sent out, the recipient

was always the same. It was to none other than Sendai-san.

Sometimes, she would reply immediately, and other times her response would come a little later. She had never turned me down even once, though if she ever had other plans, she would let me know that she was running late. Today happened to be one of those days, so when I received her reply, it read:

『I have something else to do first, so is it okay if I come by a little later? 』

『I'll be waiting at home.』

That was the stock answer I would always reply with in situations like these. After sending her that message, our classes went on again.

When she said that she "had other things to do", she was probably referring to hanging out with Ibaraki-san and the others.

From my spot by the window, I looked over at Ibaraki-san, whose desk was situated close to the hallway.

She was flashy and outgoing and was generally considered the center of the class. She was always talking about people or things that she found either cool or cute. All of the conversations she had with others seemed rather uninteresting, and I couldn't help but think of her as someone who lived in a different world from me. On top of that, she was quite irritable as well, so she felt like the kind of person you'd be better off avoiding altogether.

I wondered if Sendai-san ever felt like it was tiring to be around her.

While listening to our teacher's voice, I looked over to one of the desks at the very front of the classroom.

The sight of neatly braided hair entered my field of vision.

She looked pretty sloppy whenever she came by my room, but that wasn't the case at school. She was kind, considerate and great at studying. She always wore a smile on her face and would never show a hint of any negative emotions. Because of that, she was part of the popular group in our class and you probably

wouldn't be able to find anyone that would tell you that they disliked her.

However, there were some people that would call her a people-pleaser behind her back.

I wasn't sure if she – who was currently giving her full attention to class – knew about that, though.

I fidgeted around with the bangs that I had accidentally cut too short.

Our classes were supposed to be fifty-minutes long each, but time felt like it was passing by way too slowly.

The teacher droned on and on, as if they were delivering a sermon, which made me drowsy.

I sluggishly managed to trudge through two more classes. Then, finally, it was time to head home.

I announced my return as I opened the front door – there was no reply.

But that was to be expected, as no one else was home.

I went to my room, and while still wearing my uniform, I laid down on my bed.

I took my time getting home, and yet, I still hadn't heard the intercom ring.

I was getting sleepy.

Right as I was about to give in to the temptation of slumber, the sound of a notification from my phone woke me up. I rubbed my eyes as I peered at the screen. The message only contained one short sentence.

『I'm heading over now.』

And then, after waiting for thirty minutes.

She came into my room.

「Sorry I'm late.」

Sendai-san said, taking off her coat and blazer, before sitting next to the table.

「That's okay, but it'll probably be late by the time you get home.」

I already knew what she was going to respond with.

I set down the usual cups of soda in front of Sendai-san, then took a seat across from her as I leaned my back against my bed.

「I'll be fine.」

"My family lets me do whatever."

It was something she'd told me many times before, and just as she said, Sendai-san wasn't concerned about when she'd be back today either. Perhaps the reason why nobody in her family scolded her for being back late was because they had that much trust in her.

「Hey, Miyagi. Do you know what day it is today?」

Sendai-san suddenly asked as she opened her bag.

「—— Niboshi Day.」

Two, one and four – which were individually read as "ni", "bo" and "shi" respectively.

Well, "two" being read as "ni" and "four" as "shi" were normal, but usually, you'd never find "one" being read as "bo". Though, when it came to wordplay, it was fine even if it was a bit of a stretch. That being said, most people would probably understand the pun if you referred to February 14th as Niboshi Day.

But Sendai-san didn't seem like she was a big fan of that answer.

She furrowed her brow and sounded unamused when she said:

「Don't reply with something that makes you sound like a bitter lonely guy. Answer me seriously.」

「It's Valentine's Day, right?」

It was an uninteresting day that people seemed to get overly excited about.

A day that was not much different from yesterday.

「Correct. I had to exchange friendship chocolates with Umina and the others earlier, so that's why I ended up being late today. Anyway, I brought some for you as well, Miyagi.」

「Huh?」

「I spent yesterday making chocolate for Umina and the others, so I thought I'd make you some too.」

Sendai-san said casually as she placed a neatly wrapped box on the table.

The wrapping paper had a floral pattern on it, and the box also came with a pink ribbon.

There was homemade chocolate inside of the box.

Her femininity was off the charts to begin with, so seeing this touched a nerve.

「You don't want it?」

When she saw that I was staring at the box without doing anything with it, she asked me with a questioning look on her face.

「I don't have any chocolate to give you in return.」

「Did you not give any to your friends?」

「We don't really do things like that.」

My friends were the type that would only make Valentine's Day chocolate if they were planning to give it to the person they liked. We exchanged birthday presents with each other, but when it

came to occasions such as Christmas, Halloween, or other trendy events along those lines, we didn't bother with preparing gifts for those.

The idea of exchanging chocolates with your friends felt like it was a custom that belonged to a totally different culture.

「I see. Well, I wasn't expecting chocolate in return anyway, so it's fine if you don't have anything. If you don't want it though, I'll just bring it back home with me.」

Sendai-san said with a smile and followed up with, "So, what will you do?"

「I'll eat it.」

「Okay.」

I picked up the overly cute-looking box from the table and untied the ribbon. I carefully peeled off the wrapping paper without ripping it, and then opened the box.

I was met with the colors white, brown, and pink.

Inside the box sat six pieces of truffles that were slightly smaller in size than the ones you'd find in stores.

「You made this?」

「I said I did, didn't I? I made them small enough to be perfectly bite-sized, too.」

Sendai-san said, sounding unusually proud of herself.

Just as she said, she made the truffles small enough that they could fit perfectly in your mouth. At first glance, the chocolates looked like they were store-bought. As someone that was terrible at cooking, hearing that these were homemade almost seemed like a lie.

God was unfair.

Sendai-san was cute, good at studying, and she could cook. Even though we were both human beings, I had none of the

qualities that she had.

It really was unfair.

I couldn't help but glare at the chocolate as Sendai-san said,

「I think they turned out pretty delicious.」

Hearing those words, I reached for one of the truffles.

But I immediately withdrew my hand.

「Feed it to me, Sendai-san.」

「Is that an order?」

「Yes, it is.」

It seemed like Sendai-san had gotten used to being ordered around, but as of recently, her mischief was starting to get out of hand.

I'd ordered her to lick my feet several times by now, but each time, she'd go a little further than what she was asked to do.

She'd do things like bite me or press her lips against my feet.

I didn't want that at all.

Sendai-san was the one who should be obeying my orders. She was the one who should be experiencing that pain and other strange feelings, not me.

And that was exactly what I was planning to do today.

「Come here.」

I was still leaning against the bedframe when I called for Sendai-san to sit next to me, and she obediently did so.

「Which one do you want to start with?」

「The white one.」

I pointed at the truffle that appeared to be dusted in powdered sugar.

「Okay.」

Sendai-san picked up the white truffle with her index finger and thumb.

I opened my mouth as the white lump that looked like snow approached my lips.

Sendai-san's Sweetness is a Lie (II)

Part 8

Sendai-san's slender and beautiful fingers picked up one of the truffles and brought them to my lips. The thought of biting her fingers crosses my mind, and I opened my mouth a bit wider than necessary to let them in. However, as soon as the chocolate brushed the tip of my tongue, I was distracted by the sweetness of the powdered sugar. I inadvertently sank my teeth into the truffle as I grabbed Sendai-san by the wrist.

「Are you not going to eat it?」

Her question seemed like it was more of a formality than anything. Meanwhile, the truffle had managed to throw a wrench in my plans. As I let go of her wrist, the sweetness of the powdered sugar spread in my mouth, even though I wasn't finished chewing it yet.

There were five more pieces of chocolate left.

I put my idea of pulling a prank on her fingers off for now as I continued to chew on the remaining bits of the chocolate.

It was delicious.

It was sweet, but the taste didn't linger very long in my mouth. Considering how smoothly the truffle seemed to melt away on my tongue, I felt like I could eat as many of them as I wanted.

「Your lips turned white.」

Sendai-san said with a smile as she extended her hand.

She tried to use her long and slender fingers to wipe my lips, but I brushed her hand away.

「Was it too sweet?」

I found it irritating that she was asking me about the taste

instead of getting annoyed at me for rudely swatting her fingers away.

Sendai-san was acting exactly like how she would at school.

She was always wearing a smile on her face and never seemed to get mad at anything.

Even though we weren't at school, Sendai-san was putting up a wall between us – she was acting like I was the only one in this room, and I wanted to drag her through that wall, and down to where I was.

「We're not at school, you know.」

I raised the temperature on my space heater and then took a sip of my soda.

「What are you trying to say?」

「You don't have to pretend to be nice.」

「I'm not pretending to be nice, I am nice.」

Sendai-san replied without a hint of shame in her voice while smiling.

「You're not very nice when you're here. If you really were that nice, you'd be sweet to me – sweet like this chocolate.」

「Whaat? I think I'm pretty kind and sweet to you. I mean, I even brought you friendship chocolate, didn't I?」

「Friendship chocolate, you say. Even though we're not actually――」

"Not actually friends."

Those were the words on my mind, but I held them back.

It wasn't the type of thing I needed to go out of my way to say. It didn't really matter whether we were friends or not, and just because she brought me friendship chocolate didn't mean we were actually friends.

Right, it wasn't a big deal.

「What is it? What were you about to say?」

「Feed me another piece.」

I changed the subject and then opened my mouth. Without probing further into what I was about to say earlier, Sendai-san picked up a pink truffle this time.

「Is this one okay?」

「That's fine.」

I stared at her fingers.

On those days where I'd ask Sendai-san to lick my feet, she would always bite my toes too.

Then, she would start licking my toes as if searching for any bite marks she may have left behind.

It'd hurt and send shivers down my spine.

But even though I found it disgusting, I didn't dislike it as much as I thought I would.

In any case, she would always make me feel things that I didn't want to feel, so I wanted to do the same thing back to her, though I would never lick someone else's feet like she does. That's why I settled for her fingers. I was fine with it since it was her hand.

Technically, I could've just given her an order to accomplish that directly without needing to use chocolate as a medium, but I found that rather boring.

Such inexplicable feelings must come unexpectedly, after all.

「Here you go.」

As if I was lured by the sound of her soft voice, I opened my mouth wide. Then, I bit down on Sendai-san's fingers along with the truffle.

I chewed, harder than I usually would for things like chocolate.

The tenderness of the meat elicited a similar kind of joy I got whenever I used a knife to cut through a thick slice of steak. Not that I had any steak with my father recently.

「Miyagi, that hurts.」

Sendai-san raised her voice in protest.

But I didn't let go.

I bit down hard enough to feel her bone against my teeth.

「Seriously, Miyagi. That really hurts.」

The sound of her low, strong voice – which was different from what I'd hear at school – was exciting to listen to.

My warm room was rapidly starting to get hotter. Intoxicated by the sweetness of the chocolate and the hardness of her bone, I could hear a voice in my head begging for more.

I applied more force on her fingers with my teeth.

Right as I was about to break the skin, Sendai-san's fingers trembled slightly.

「Miyagi!」

When she shouted at me, I released my hold on her fingers and savored the rest of the chocolate in my mouth.

「……. Was that supposed to be payback?」

Sendai-san asked while examining her hand.

There wasn't a trace of anger on her face.

But at least she looked like she was in pain.

「Who knows? Give me your hand.」

The truffle that was in my mouth had completely melted away by now and was making its way to my stomach. Upon hearing my demand, a slight frown appeared on Sendai-san's face, as if she knew what was coming next. However, she doesn't go against my word. Even though I hadn't gone into the specifics of my order, she wordlessly extended her hand to my lips.

Then, I brushed her fingers with the tip of my tongue.

As I slowly traced over the shape of the bite marks I left behind on her fingers, Sendai-san pulled on my front bangs.

「You cut your hair?」

Earlier, I may have said that I cut it too short, but it was only by a little bit.

At least, I didn't cut it so short that Sendai-san – whom I've never spoken to at school before – could've noticed it.

The distance between us was as wide as the Ganges River. —— Not that I remember how big the Ganges River is, but there was a clear divide between us.

Even though we were supposed to be about that distant from each other, it stirred my heart knowing that Sendai-san noticed that I'd cut my bangs.

Instead of replying to her, I tried to bite down on her finger again.

But before I could do so, her finger was pushed further into my mouth.

The finger in my mouth was pushed in to the second joint, and it moved as if it was exploring the inside. When her fingertip brushed against the inside of my cheek, it sent tingles down my spine.

I could feel uncontrollable emotions start to well up in me.

Even though I found this disgusting, I didn't want it to stop. The strange feeling in my chest began to grow by the second.

I hated this.

I gently bit the finger that was moving around in my mouth. When I pressed my tongue against the finger and started licking it, she forcibly pulled it out.

「Did that taste good?」

I stared at Sendai-san, who asked that question as if nothing even happened.

I wondered if I was able to inflict the same amount of pain and discomfort as she did to me whenever she bit on my toes.

I had no idea.

Sendai-san was always hiding her emotions behind her smile, after all.

Since I didn't get the reaction I wanted out of her, I gave her a curt reply.

「The chocolates tasted better.」

「I'll bet. Do you want any more?」

Sendai-san asked without breaking her smile.

I hated that look on her face, that made it seem like nothing had happened just now.

I bit down on her fingers so hard that she needed to raise her voice at me, and there was no way she wasn't repulsed by having her fingers licked so much. That's why, I had to rip off the mask that allowed her to gloss over everything so easily.

「Give me that one.」

I pointed at the brown-colored truffle, which seemed to be dusted with cocoa powder.

「Open your mouth.」

Sendai-san said as she picked up the third piece of chocolate

that I requested from her.

Sendai-san's Sweetness is a Lie (III)

Part 9

Something was about to happen.

She was probably aware of it too. Nonetheless, she brought the brown-colored lump towards my mouth. As if she were simply following instructions written on a manual, she let the chocolate touch my lips, and as if I had no choice but to see my plan all the way through, I bit down on Sendai-san's finger along with the truffle.

「Miyagi, that hurts.」

Sendai-san spoke, as if reciting words as if she were reading them off a script. Although the words were being said out loud, it didn't sound like there was any hint of emotion behind them.

Well, that was only natural.

I wasn't even biting that hard yet.

Little by little, I put more strength into my canine teeth in hopes of being able to leave visible marks behind.

As my teeth sank into Sendai-san's finger, the chocolate was melting away on the tip of my tongue, making it seem like her finger tasted deliciously sweet. Wanting to finish off the rest of the truffle, I dug my canines even deeper, causing her to try and push me away by my forehead.

「Hey, I said that hurts.」

This time, it didn't seem like she was lying, and I could hear the emotion behind her voice. She also put more force into the hand that was on my forehead.

「Let go.」

Sendai-san had no right to order me around.

So I chose not to listen to her.

Instead, I bit down even harder.

It seemed like it was getting too painful for her – she repeated her demand that I let go, and finally managed to pull her finger out of my mouth. Only the remnants of the chocolate were left in my mouth, to be swallowed as they melted away.

Although we were not friends, the friendship chocolate that she made was delicious. She probably did not intend for her friendship chocolate to be consumed this way, but it worked well in my favor. I mean, in the end, chocolate was meant to be eaten. As long as we got there in the end, it didn't really matter how we got there.

But when I looked over at the person who made the chocolate, her smile had disappeared completely.

「Get me a tissue.」

Sendai-san spoke in a voice that sounded lower than usual.

My tissue box, which had a cover in the shape of a crocodile, was sitting across the table from me. If anything, Sendai-san was closer to it.

Looking at her finger, I could see cocoa powder and chocolate smeared on it.

It wasn't like she absolutely needed a tissue to clean it off.

I ignored Sendai-san's request and ran my tongue along her index finger. This was probably making it harder than it needed to be, but as the person who dirtied Sendai-san's finger in the first place, I had to be the one to clean it off as well.

「Miyagi.」

I pretended I couldn't hear her voice as I pressed my lips against the bite marks I left behind and licked them. I made my way to the second joint on her finger and sucked on the base of it. Then, I kissed it, which made a sound that was barely audible. Sendai-san

trembled slightly for a moment in response.

「Hold on. That feels disgusting.」

Her voice sounded flat.

However, I was sure that Sendai-san was feeling the same things I had, back when she was doing these same things to me.

It was disgusting, but there was also something more to it.

I felt like I could hear exactly what that feeling was behind the sound of her flat voice, so I pressed my tongue against her finger again. But the sweet taste of chocolate that I was expecting had faded away.

Human skin felt unlike anything that had ever entered my mouth before. It wasn't hot or cold; human fingers didn't taste very good, either.

But even so, this was the happiest I'd been all day.

I started stroking my tongue against her thumb.

Just like I did with her index finger, as though there was chocolate to be licked off, I slowly moved my tongue around. Sendai-sand expelled a small sigh.

「Miyagi, you're screwing around too much.」

She pushed me away with a strong shove as she spoke, and her thumb left my mouth. Then, I grabbed the crocodile-shaped box that looked like it had tissues growing from its back and threw it at Sendai-san.

「Do you think it's fun doing things like this?」

Sendai-san stared at me as she wiped off her fingers.

「Of course.」

When I answered her with a smile, she pushed the crocodile back to me.

「Seriously, what kind of a hobby is this?」

「Eating humans isn't my hobby, though.」

「Don't bite me, then.」

Sendai-san said, sounding dumbfounded as she took a sip of her soda.

「That seriously hurt earlier. Couldn't that be considered a breach of contract?」

「It wasn't violence. And you did the same thing to me before, so just bear with it.」

「I didn't bite you nearly as hard. I seriously thought you were going to bite my whole finger off.」

「Well, I was only trying to eat some chocolate, but other things just ended up happening.」

「Are you going to eat any more?」

「What do you want me to do?」

「…… Do whatever you want.」

Sendai-san said, as if she wanted me to just throw the rest away.

I didn't want to be friends with her.

The only connection we had was through money, and that was the only kind of connection we needed.

So it didn't matter what Sendai-san thought, I had the right to do whatever I wanted with her.

That was how things should've been.

But despite that, the next words that came out of my mouth were different from what I expected.

「Do you want to have dinner?」

「Sure.」

Sendai-san answered immediately.

Eating with two people was better than eating alone.

Even if it didn't change the taste of the food, having someone else to dine with made it feel like I was eating a real meal.

I got up and headed for the kitchen. Without needing to be told, Sendai-san followed after me. I turned the lights on as Sendai-san took a seat at the bar that separated the kitchen from the living room.

I grabbed a bag of french fries from the freezer and stuck it in the microwave. I prepared two plates and pulled a couple of ready-made Hamburg steaks from the refrigerator. When the microwave beeped, I took the bag of fries out and replaced it with the Hamburg steaks.

That was about all the work that I needed to put in, and dinner was ready in no time at all. However, compared to the three minutes it would usually take to cook instant noodles, doing all of this took a bit longer.

「It's ready.」

When I placed the plate of fries and the two Hamburg steaks on the table, Sendai-san happily said,

「There are two portions, huh.」

For some reason, Sendai-san made it sound like I'd gone out of my way to buy a Hamburg steak for her as well.

「This is my father's portion.」

That was my intention today.

I bought a Hamburg steak so my father could eat it.

That was all there was to it. It wasn't like I prepared it specifically for Sendai-san.

「What's your father going to eat, then?」

Sendai-san asked without making any mention of my mother.

「There are other things for him to eat.」

The words that came out of my mouth just now weren't true.

The refrigerator was pretty much empty.

However, my father rarely ever ate at home anyway, so it didn't really matter whether it was full or not.

「It's fine, just eat it.」

I said curtly as I sat down next to Sendai-san. As the words, "Let's eat", escaped my mouth, I heard the person next to me say the same thing in unison. But that didn't make us any closer than we were a minute ago, so we proceeded to eat in silence.

We didn't have anything to talk about, but that wasn't much of a problem.

It was much less stressful than forcing a conversation anyway.

I proceeded to chew on the Hamburg steak that was far more tender than Sendai-san's fingers.

The only sounds that could be heard between us were the various noises from our chopsticks and tableware.

The Hamburg steaks and french fries gradually disappeared from our plates, and when everything was nearly done and dusted, Sendai-san opened her mouth.

「Want me to make you dinner next time?」

「What are you saying all of a sudden?」

「You don't want me to?」

The truffles she made were delicious, so there was no reason

to be suspicious of her cooking. However, there was no reason to have Sendai-san cook for me either, and I didn't want her to do anything I hadn't ordered her to do.

My "orders" should be the only thing that constitute our relationship.

「I don't need you to make dinner.」

「I see.」

Sendai-san replied without a hint of discouragement in her voice as she brought another bite of the Hamburg steak to her mouth.

Having eaten in silence, we finished off our meals in no time at all.

The same thing happened when we ate cup noodles together right before winter break.

I decided to leave washing the dishes for later, so we returned to my room.

「Do you have any other orders?」

「No.」

「Okay, then I'm going back home.」

Sendai-san put her blazer and coat back on before heading for the front entrance.

「I'll see you off.」

The two of us exited through the door and got on the elevator.

「The truffles were delicious. Thank you.」

As I watched the numbers on the elevator display gradually make its way down from "five", I gave my impressions of her gift and expressed my gratitude for it. I had that much common courtesy, at least.

「You're welcome.」

I heard Sendai-san say as the elevator approached our stop. I walked her to the entrance. Sendai-san waved at me while saying, 「See you later.」

「Bye-bye.」

As I called out to her like I usually did, Sendai-san turned around. Up until now, she had never turned around even once. And yet, she did so this time, replying with, 「Bye-bye」, as she waved at me again.

Sendai-san's Sweetness is a Lie (IV)

Part 10

Valentine's Day came and went, and the remaining three pieces of chocolate were long gone. Not that I wanted to eat it again, but I wouldn't have any complaints if I had two or three more of them.

I liked sweet things, so my appetite for them knew no bounds.

However, they didn't have to be made by Sendai-san. In fact, it didn't matter who made the sweets; as long as they weren't disgusting, it was fine even if the sweets weren't really that tasty.

The same idea applied to the dinner that Sendai-san had volunteered to cook for me. It didn't matter if it was delicious or not. It would all end up in my stomach anyway… Well, Sendai-san may have said she would cook dinner for me, but I wasn't sure if she truly intended on making it or not.

While the teacher droned on in the background, I held my hand to my stomach area.

I stared at the clock that hung above the blackboard. It hadn't been that long since class started. I still had to wait at least thirty-five minutes before lunchtime.

「Miyagi, you're up next.」

The teacher called on me with a voice that sounded like they were trying to cast a sleep spell straight out of a video game. Although I was only somewhat paying attention to the lecture, I knew the teacher was asking me to read a passage from my textbook.

I stood up while holding my English textbook in my hands.

I had no intentions of following a career that would involve fluency in English. I had no plans of leaving Japan either, so it

wasn't going to be a problem even if I didn't understand English. However, none of that seemed to matter right now. My English classes weren't going to take mercy on me, and the teacher could call on me whenever they wanted.

I reluctantly began to read from my textbook.

I recognised some of the words on the page, but others I wasn't sure if I'd even seen before now – I had to pause and sound them out. The teacher filled in a couple of those blanks here and there, but I didn't know if I was even pronouncing them correctly or not.

「That's enough. Sit back down, Miyagi. You should pay more attention to class next time.」

The teacher said, sounding a bit disappointed. I was pretty sure that even if I did pay more attention to class, I would still never come to understand English.

「Then, let's have Sendai pick it up from here.」

Sendai-san answered with, "Okay", as she got up from her seat.

With a straightened back, she began reading from the textbook.

She spoke with clear enunciation, without making any mistakes or getting stuck on difficult words. If our voices could be described with different kinds of penmanship, Sendai-san's words would be written in cursive letters, while mine would come out as unstable block letters drawn by a child.

She could do most things flawlessly.

I heaved a sigh while staring at my textbook.

I don't think I could ever understand.

Her hair color was brownish and she wore makeup. Even her skirt length was shorter than what was acceptable by school rules. Sendai-san wasn't following school regulations properly, and yet, our teachers would always let her get away with it. She may have

called herself clean and pure, but if that were truly the case, would she be wearing makeup? And could someone who was so willing to bite someone else's foot really be considered pure? I highly doubted it.

But no matter how much time I poured into thinking about these things, it wasn't going to change my own circumstances, and it certainly wasn't going to make me as capable as Sendai-san was.

I flipped through the pages of my textbook.

After a little while, Sendai-san's voice trailed off, and all that was left was the sound of chalk sliding across the blackboard.

We spent a long, long while just copying what was written on the blackboard into our notebooks. The teacher ended up going five minutes over and into our lunchbreak to wrap up the class. Then, the first moment I could, I pulled out my smartphone from my bag.

There was a certain message I needed to send before my friend, Maika, could approach me from the very back of the classroom.

The recipient was none other than Sendai-san, and the body of the message was the same as ever.

『Come over today.』

The reply came in right away, and my after-school plans were decided.

After spending my lunch break in the cafeteria, our remaining classes in the afternoon went by without a hitch. I left for home with Maika, parting ways when she had to make a detour elsewhere. Not long after I got back, I received a message from Sendai-san that read, 『I'll be there soon』. Rolling around on my bed as I waited, I heard the intercom ringing and let Sendai san in.

「Sorry to keep you waiting.」

Sendai-san said as she took off her coat and blazer and sat down in front of my bookshelf as if it were the most natural thing to do. I placed a five-thousand yen bill on top of her head and left the room. I put on my slippers and went towards the kitchen.

I set two cups on the counter and pulled some soda out of the refrigerator. When I brought the cups back to my room, I found Sendai-san lying on my bed as if she owned the place.

Next to the unkempt girl lying on my bed were three manga volumes that she had picked out for herself. Since this was a sight that I'd already grown used to, I let it be and placed the two cups on the table. I walked over to my bookshelf and chose a manga for myself as well. Then, I flipped the pages of the book that I'd already read through several times before.

There weren't really a lot of things that I could order her to do. As long as we were in my room, I could command Sendai-san around as if she were my servant, but there were also limits to those orders because of the rules that we set. Plus, I didn't want to be cruel to her all the time, and I didn't want her to do things that were too weird either.

And so, the time passed by quickly.

After finishing one volume of my manga, I continued with reading the next one.

The only sounds that could be heard from my room were my space heater and the turning of pages.

By the time I picked up the third volume, Sendai-san's voice broke the silence.

「Miyagi, do you play any games?」

「I do.」

「Like those kinds of games where hot guys come and flirt with you?」

I answered Sendai-san without taking my eyes off my manga.

「I don't play those types of games.」

「Oh, really? You own a lot romance manga, so I thought you'd like that sort of thing.」

I did like romance manga, but that didn't necessarily mean I was into those types of games. If we were talking about my video game genre of choice, it would be RPGs. I'd rather play a game where I could live out a completely different life from my own than to make myself the target of several love interests.

「I bet you think the only games that I play are the ones that otakus like.」

「Oh, you don't?」

When I looked up from my manga, I saw a mischievous smile on Sendai-san's face.

Without saying anything more, I got up from my seat.

Perhaps she wasn't doing it intentionally, but it felt as if she was acting like she was above me. If we were at school right now, that'd be the case, but not here. I didn't find her attitude particularly amusing.

「Do my English homework for me.」

I pulled my textbook and worksheets out of my bag and spread them across my table. However, Sendai-san did not move from the bed.

「I'll do it after I'm finished reading this.」

「Do it right now.」

「You're so stingy, Miyagi.」

She said as she reluctantly took a seat across from me. Then, she pulled out her own worksheets from her bag and began filling them in.

「I wish you could write the answers directly onto my sheets too.」

「I told you before, didn't I? They'll notice that the handwriting is the same and we'll get caught.」

「Just learn to forge my handwriting, then.」

「I don't want us to get scolded if we get caught. Plus, we already agreed that anything that interferes with school is against the terms of our agreement, didn't we?」

Sendai-san and I meet after school.

And then we do things together.

We promised that I wouldn't order her to do anything that would expose either of those two things.

Although what Sendai-san said was correct, I felt like it would be easy for her to imitate my handwriting.

She could do it, she just didn't want to.

That was probably what it was.

I poked Sendai-san on the cheek with my mechanical pencil.

「What is it?」

「Lick it.」

It was boring watching Sendai-san focus so seriously on homework, so this was just for me to pass the time.

While sitting on the other side of the table, Sendai-san lifted her head and pressed her lips against the push button of my mechanical pencil. Then, I slid the pencil towards the corner of her mouth. As I slowly traced her lips with it, Sendai-san began to lick the pencil and gnawed on it without the slightest hint of hesitation.

「I don't like it when you do that.」

I said as I pulled the pencil out of her mouth.

「Don't like it when I do what?」

「When you start doing things I didn't tell you to do.」

I had ordered her to lick the pencil, not chew on it.

That was the only thing I asked for.

「Sendai-san, do you enjoy being ordered around? Because it seems like you do.」

「Does it look like I'm having fun?」

I wouldn't say she looked happy doing it, but it didn't really seem like she was against it either.

Up until now, Sendai-san has never once disobeyed my orders.

Right now, she was doing what I ordered, but at the same time I didn't feel I was getting exactly what I wanted from her.

「—— Stop making it seem like you are.」

I shoved the pencil back into her mouth. I poked her tongue around with the push button and then slid it against her hard palate as if I were scratching it. When I pulled the pencil out of her mouth, Sendai-san frowned, looking unamused, and furrowed her eyebrows.

「That's the kind of face that I want to see.」

I'd never felt like that towards my friends before.

But Sendai-san wasn't my friend, so it was fine to want that out of her.

「You really are a pervert, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san spoke in a low voice that you'd never hear from her at school as she attempted to confiscate the pencil from me. Dodging her hand, I felt a smile form on my face.

「You might be right about that.」

Sendai-san, who hardly ever frowned at school, looked blatantly displeased.

The Sendai-san who only ever showed her good side to others had disappeared.

A Sendai-san that no one else knew about was right here.

I couldn't help but revel in the joy I felt at this very moment.

I poked the back of Sendai-san's hand with the sharp end of my mechanical pencil.

「Hey, that's dangerous.」

Sendai-san said, her voice sounding gloomy. I continued to dig the tip into her skin until the lead broke. 「That hurts,」 was all she said in response.

I moved the pencil away from Sendai-san's hand, reached over to the crocodile that looked like it had tissues growing from its back, and pulled out a tissue to wipe down the push button.

「Hey, can you make dinner?」

I wanted to confirm what she said the other day was the truth, and not something she had uttered on a whim.

「You said you didn't want to eat it, though?」

Sendai-san replied coldly while expelling a small sigh. Then, as if to calm herself down, she shut her eyes for a moment before looking at me.

「But if you order me to, then I will.」

Sendai-san said quietly as she spelled out some English words on her worksheet.

I pay her five-thousand yen to order her around.

But I didn't want to order her to make me dinner.

I wanted to give orders for bigger and better things.

I started writing on my own worksheets, imitating her neat penmanship and beautifully written words as I went.

Chapter 4

I Know That Miyagi Doesn't Taste Good (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 11

「I'm home.」

I announced my return home, directing my voice towards the living room. I could hear faint laughter coming from the room and see light leaking through the door, but that was the only thing that I heard. Even though they should've heard me, not a single person bothered to respond. Well, I expected as much, so it wasn't like I had anything to complain about either.

Besides, if someone suddenly decided to have a change of heart today and welcomed me back home, I would've found it bothersome. Compared to that, I would much rather be ignored. Things felt more natural this way.

I had just finished eating an unhealthy meal at Miyagi's place, so I wasn't very hungry. Since I didn't have a reason to enter the living room, I went straight for my bedroom.

The second I entered my room – which was furnished with just the bare minimum – I took off my clothes and changed into loungewear. I finished my homework when I was at Miyagi's house, so there was nothing left on my to-do list for the rest of today.

I took my wallet out of my bag, and pulled out the five-thousand yen bill Miyagi gave me. I folded it, and slid it into the piggy bank I kept on top of my drawers. It was supposed to be able to hold up to a million yen, if you used five-hundred yen coins.

I wondered how much was inside of the piggy bank now.

Miyagi paid me five-thousand yen once, sometimes twice a week. I lost count of how many bills I deposited into the piggy bank,

but considering our arrangement first started back in the summer, there was probably quite a bit in there.

I wasn't going to go out of my way to break it open and check, and no matter how much money I put in there, I had no plans on spending it at the moment either. However, I was a bit curious about how much time I spent with Miyagi.

Rattling noises came from the piggy bank when I shook it around.

That was probably the sound of the five-hundred yen coins I had put in there, long before I started depositing five-thousand yen bills into it. Unfortunately, it didn't give me a clue as to how long I'd been hanging around Miyagi.

I placed my piggy bank back on the drawers.

Miyagi gave me five-thousand yen just to order me around a little.

For a high schooler, it was a lot of money. It wasn't exactly the kind of money she should've been able to afford to throw around so casually, but Miyagi paid me every single week. She said money wasn't an issue for her, but when I thought about how much was sitting in my piggy bank right now, it made my heart feel a little heavy. If only the orders she gave me actually felt like they were worth five-thousand yen. Maybe then I wouldn't have to think so much of it.

That being said, earlier today, the way Miyagi shoved her mechanical pencil into my mouth and then followed up with 『That's the kind of face that I want to see』 made me feel like I'd truly earned the money this time around.

That moment was the happiest I'd ever seen Miyagi.

But if that was the price that I had to pay for five-thousand yen, then I wasn't very receptive to that idea. I wasn't wrong when I said「You really are a pervert, Miyagi」to her; unlike her, I wasn't the kind of pervert that would willingly do things I didn't like.

If I was, then I'd be nothing more than a dog who mindlessly obeyed orders.

The fact that Miyagi wanted to see my disgusted face made me think there was something really messed up about her.

「Just what is going through her head?」

I muttered under my breath to no one in particular as I untied my hair. A second later, I received a notification on my phone. When I looked at the screen, I saw that Umina had sent me a message that read『Did you watch it?』.

Now that she mentioned it, the new episode of Umina's favorite drama aired today.

But by the time I turned on the TV, the episode was almost over, so I replied with:

『I was in the bath, but I'll watch a recording of it.』

If I started on the episode right now, even if I skipped through all of the commercials, I'd still be trapped for a whole fifty minutes.

Just the thought of that alone made me feel like it was too much of a hassle to go through.

The show I had to watch was a romantic drama. It wasn't a genre I particularly disliked, but the kind of stories Umina liked didn't suit my tastes at all. I wouldn't go as far as calling it a waste of time, but I'd much rather be doing something else than watch a boring drama.

Miyagi rarely called for me two days in a row, which meant I'd have to go somewhere with Umina and the others tomorrow after school. The things we did after school were pretty ordinary, and I didn't dislike the girls I hung out with. But the lengths I had to go in order to make myself feel comfortable around them was kind of a pain.

And if we hung out tomorrow, we were definitely going to be discussing what happened in today's episode.

「If I tell them I didn't watch it, I'll probably bring down the mood.」

If it were Miyagi, I wouldn't go out of my way to watch it for her.

I laid down on my bed and stretched my arms out.

I stuck my hand out towards the ceiling light and stared at my index finger.

The bite marks that Miyagi left on Valentine's Day had long faded away.

Well, it would've been a problem if they hadn't.

That day, I was surprised that she could bite someone else's finger so easily, without even a hint of hesitation. But the marks had disappeared the very next day.

Orders that interfered with school were against the rules.

If her bite marks had remained on my finger, Umina and the others would never let me hear the end of it, and that would've been a violation of our rules. I guess in her own unique way, Miyagi was accommodating to me. That said, perhaps biting like that didn't leave marks behind in the first place. I'd never actually been bitten before, so I couldn't say whether this was Miyagi trying to be considerate, or if I was just lucky.

I caressed the area where the bite mark used to be.

It didn't hurt or anything.

I pressed my lips against my finger. As if following an invisible trail, I traced over the path with my tongue.

It didn't really feel like anything at all.

Well, there was no surprise there.

Miyagi had run her tongue from the second joint of my finger all the way to the fingertip.

The feeling of being licked by Miyagi was disgusting.

But at the same time, the sensation of her soft tongue stroking my finger made my nerves tingle, giving rise to a strange feeling in me.

—— In that moment, was I making the same face that Miyagi did before?

Back when I licked Miyagi's foot and then bit her.

I remembered the face she made that day.

If that was the kind of expression that was on my face too, then—.

I let out a sigh as I got up from my bed.

You know what, maybe I'll watch the episode after all.

Just to make the episode go by quicker, I turned up the playback speed. I pressed the play button on the remote and I watched as the characters moved around and spoke incredibly fast.

I didn't like pain.

I also didn't like being treated so rudely either.

But despite all of that, I felt more at ease being in Miyagi's room than my own.

Maybe there was something messed up about me too.

Even if the things we did to each other had no deeper meaning to them, doing stuff like licking each other's skin was probably distorting our sense of distance. But now that we've come this far, I had no intention of going back; Miyagi most likely wasn't going to right herself either, after heading down the path of corruption.

I increased the volume on the TV.

The voice of the handsome actor that Umina liked grew louder.

Then, I focused all of my attention on the drama that I wasn't

even interested in.

I Know That Miyagi Doesn't Taste Good (II)

Part 12

"I want a boyfriend."

"I want a cool boyfriend who won't cheat on me."

Boyfriend, boyfriend, boyfriend.

We were hanging out in a karaoke booth after school, where Umina kept repeating the word "boyfriend" over and over and over again, to the point I was beginning to think she was a robot who had no other words programmed into her dictionary.

One of the girls in our friend group got a boyfriend. Umina had been dumped by her own boyfriend in January, and as soon as she found out about this, wanting a boyfriend became all she could talk about. Umina was kind of a pain at times like these. Even though I went out of my way to watch that show yesterday, it seemed like it wasn't going to be useful at all today.

「Must be nice for you, huh, Hazuki. Since you're so popular and all.」

I forced a smile on my face when I heard Umina say my name.

"Popular," she said.

It didn't matter if it was true or not.

My reply had already been decided from the very start. I was pretty much required to say something along the lines of, 「You're more popular, Umina」 without being too pushy about it or denying what she said about me.

Girls were like colorful cakes, decorated with whipped cream and fresh fruit on top, but not all of them were as sweet as real

cakes on the inside. They might look sweet, right up to the moment you take a bite – then you notice the poison. So, without sounding sarcastic, I had to steer Umina away from the poisonous topic of my own popularity, and butter her up instead.

Umina's mood had already been steadily declining, so she seemed unconvinced.

「I mean, you left us in the middle of Valentine's Day, didn't you, Hazuki? Were you meeting up with someone else? Was it Iida? Or maybe even Sasaki?」

「I already told you, that's not it. I had to leave because my parents called for me. If I ever get a boyfriend, you'll definitely be the first to know about it, Umina.」

Miyagi had called for me on Valentine's Day, so I had to part ways with the group a bit earlier than usual. But the next day, Umina and the others started saying I'd actually gone to meet up with my supposed boyfriend instead. I thought I'd managed to clear up their misunderstanding; now Umina was throwing a tantrum, though, so I guess it was going to be used against me again.

Umina wasn't a bad person, though.

Whenever I felt down or I had any worries, she would be there to offer me some encouragement. She just had more emotional ups and downs than most people.

That being said, it was difficult to keep her in a good mood all the time.

Out of the four people in our friend group, only one person had a boyfriend and she was really excited about it. Meanwhile, the other person in our group had crossed Umina and was subsequently banished. That left me as the only person responsible for fixing Umina's mood.

Seriously, what a hassle.

At times like this, I wished Miyagi would contact me.

Technically I could've just made a random excuse up and left, but it was easier to wriggle my way out if I had a real reason to do

so.

But judging by how things have gone up to now, Miyagi was unlikely to ask for me two days in a row; today was no different.

In the end, Miyagi didn't contact me until a week later. She had me do her homework again and we shared another unhealthy meal together. The same happened the next time I visited, and then the time after that as well. Each time I went over, I would always be served unhealthy food for dinner. Miyagi never once brought up the topic of having me cook for her either.

But today, when she messaged me, I went straight to the supermarket from the bookstore and bought some chicken before heading for Miyagi's house.

I was planning to make a side dish.

Besides, I didn't think it was a good idea for us to continue eating stuff like cup noodles or frozen foods for dinner.

Plus, I wanted to see the look on Miyagi's face when I did something she hadn't ordered me to. And there was no reason I had to be so conscious of what Miyagi had said about wanting to see my disgusted face.

Also, making dinner at Miyagi's place was no different from just making it at home.

Anyway, I ended up bringing a bag of ingredients for tonight's dinner into Miyagi's room.

「Were you out with Ibaraki-san and the others?」

Miyagi asked, trying to figure out why I was late, as she gave me a five-thousand yen bill.

「Nope. Here, put this stuff in the fridge.」

I took the five-thousand yen bill from her and handed her the bag of ingredients that I had bought from the supermarket.

「What is this?」

「Ingredients for karaage.」

「Why did you bring all of this here?」

「I'm making dinner here tonight.」

「I didn't order you to do that.」

Miyagi looked blatantly displeased.

I had to obey her orders.

That was what I promised her, but she never made me promise not to make her dinner. I had the freedom to do whatever I wanted unless I was ordered otherwise, so at least for today, I shouldn't be at fault if I made her dinner.

As if Miyagi realized that herself, she refrained from telling me not to make dinner. Instead, she simply furrowed her brows and glared at me.

I didn't think I was the type of person who wanted to see someone else's disgusted face, but somehow, I found it amusing to watch Miyagi's reactions whenever I did things she didn't ask for.

「Look at it this way. I haven't done anything to thank you for all the times you provided dinner for me. Besides, I want to eat something decent every now and then.」

After coming up with some excuses so she wouldn't turn me down, I tried to hand the bag over to the girl who actually lived here, but Miyagi would not take it from me.

「Put it in the refrigerator yourself.」

Miyagi said bluntly as she went to turn her space heater on, raising the setting high enough to turn the whole room hot. Then she walked out of the room and headed for the kitchen. I followed closely behind her, the plastic bag in my hands crinkling as I went. When we reached the kitchen, I found myself standing in front of a ridiculously large fridge.

Just how many people are in her family?

I wondered to myself as I opened the fridge, but when I looked inside, it was incredibly empty despite how big it was.

「Hey, your fridge is practically empty. Isn't it kind of bad that the only thing you have in here is juice?」

「It isn't bad at all.」

She said with a low voice, insisting that things were fine this way.

Well, I guess it wasn't really my place to be complaining about other people's fridges.

I silently loaded the ingredients for tonight's dinner into the fridge. The last few items in the bag were a couple of bags of flour and potato starch – I figured Miyagi probably didn't have either of these things, so I made sure to buy them myself. After I was finished emptying the bag, I called out to Miyagi.

「What are you going to order me to do today?」

「Why not just do whatever you want?」

「Well, I just think if we're going to save it for later, then I'd like to make the karaage now.」

「I haven't decided on anything yet, so just do as you please.」

Miyagi said this as if it wasn't her problem, as she tried to leave the kitchen.

「Wait. Cut the cabbage for me.」

I took the cabbage out of the fridge and handed it to Miyagi.

「Me?」

「Well, I don't see anyone else here.」

「You're the one who said you wanted to make dinner, Sendai-san, so you should do all of the work yourself.」

「Oh, don't tell me. You don't know how to thin-slice a cabbage, do you?」

I asked her while washing the cutting board. Then, I heard her respond in a low voice.

「I'll do it.」

So does she know how to thin-slice a cabbage or not?

I wasn't sure what the answer was, but Miyagi put the cabbage on the cutting board.

I started grating the ginger right beside her. After that, I threw it into a bowl and poured soy sauce and sake into it. I didn't really like garlic, so I decided not to include it. Then, I put the chicken that had already been cut into appropriate serving sizes into the marinade and rubbed it all in.

Out of curiosity, I glanced over at Miyagi, but instead of seeing her cut the cabbage, it looked more like she was trying to slice her fingers off. Well, that was kind of an exaggeration, but I probably should've known better than to hand a knife over to someone who clearly hadn't used one before.

「Wait, Miyagi. Isn't that kind of dangerous?」

「What is?」

「Look at your hands! You should be curling your fingers to form a cat's paw!」

「What do you mean by "a cat's paw"?」

「You never learned it when you were in home economics?」

The fingers on the left hand had to be curled inward whenever anything was being cut.

She should've learned that already.

And yet, the way her fingers were sticking out while she was holding the cabbage was scaring me.

「I don't remember.」

Miyagi replied curtly as she lowered her knife.

What's more, even though I asked her to slice the cabbage into thin strips, all I could see were chunks spread all over the cutting board.

「If you cut it like that, you're just going to end up slicing your fingers off instead of the cabbage. And you're lifting the knife way too high.」

It would be an exaggeration to say she was swinging the knife down, but she was still lifting it quite high.

「Sendai-san, you've got way too much to say. Be quiet already.」

「Ahh, geez. Miyagi, just go somewhere else.」

I was getting anxious just looking at her.

If that was the case, then I'd rather just handle everything myself.

However, she didn't back down.

「Leave me alone. Just let me do it.」

Whenever she brought the knife down on the cabbage, it sounded like the cutting board was being smacked.

It was a huge mistake asking her to do this.

But no matter how much I regretted it, I couldn't take back my request to have the cabbage thinly sliced. In the end, I couldn't help but feel nervous as I sprinkled the chicken with flour and potato starch.

Whack.

Smack.

Noises that didn't sound at all like a cabbage being sliced

kept coming, one after the other. Suddenly, they stopped, and I heard Miyagi let out a quiet groan.

「What's wrong?」

No response.

「Miyagi?」

When I lowered my gaze to her hand, I saw that part of the green cabbage had been dyed red.

「Hey, Miyagi. You're bleeding. If you cut yourself, then you should've said something right away.」

I washed off all of the powder from my hands and grabbed Miyagi by the wrist. When I pulled her hand towards the running water, she immediately turned the faucet off.

「In situations like this, shouldn't you be licking the cut on my finger?」

「You read too much manga. Even if I lick it, the wound isn't going to heal on its own. You have to wash it properly and then bandage it.」

「Don't I need to disinfect it?」

「Disinfecting it might make the wound heal slower. So, where do you keep your bandages? If you don't have any, should I go grab mine?」

The cut didn't look that deep.

But blood was still dripping from her index finger.

Wash the wound and then stick a bandage on it.

And then kick Miyagi out of the kitchen.

That was all that needed to happen, but for some reason, Miyagi wouldn't let me do any of it.

「Okay, then disinfect my wound by licking it.」

Miyagi said as she stuck her finger out towards me.

「You're still bleeding, and licking it isn't going to disinfect it.」

「It's an order.」

「… Did you cut yourself on purpose?」

「As if.」

Miyagi held her finger out right in front of me, as if telling me that her orders were absolute.

Blood continued to flow from the cut, dyeing her finger red.

Just the sight of it filled my mouth with the taste of iron.

「Hurry up, Sendai-san.」

Even though I'd licked my own blood before, I couldn't say the same about someone else's.

Was the taste of someone else's blood the same as my own?

I would soon find out the answer to that question.

I Know That Miyagi Doesn't Taste Good (III)

Part 13

It didn't matter who it was, no one's blood tasted good.

The sensation of licking blood off someone else's finger was even worse than I expected.

Miyagi's blood tasted exactly like mine when I licked my own blood – like rusty iron. That being said, I'd never licked rust or iron before, so I couldn't say whether that was really true or not. Regardless, it tasted terrible. Even soda, which I wasn't particularly a fan of, was way better than this.

「Lick it properly.」

She said as she pushed the finger further towards me. The liquid that was escaping her finger wet my lips. Out of pure reflex, I closed my mouth. However, as if trying to pry it open, Miyagi stuck her finger right into my mouth.

When her finger brushed my tongue, I could taste her blood more clearly than before.

Was it type A? Type B?

Or perhaps even a different blood type?

I didn't know what Miyagi's blood type was, but that didn't matter. Regardless of her blood type, I wasn't licking her finger because I wanted to. As if my feelings didn't matter either, her finger did not leave my mouth. Instead, my tongue was now pressed against the opening of her wound, which caused the blood to taste even stronger.

Her blood, which tasted even stronger than mine had in the past, was not delicious at all.

I would never do this with anyone other than Miyagi.

Even if I had a lover in the future and they ended up cutting their finger, I would never lick their blood off like this.

It didn't taste good and it wasn't very hygienic either.

Miyagi would be the first and last person I would ever do this with.

I swallowed the blood that was in my mouth.

Having someone else's bodily fluids trickling down my throat wasn't a pleasant feeling in the slightest. But instead of resisting, I pressed down even harder on her wound with my tongue, causing Miyagi to let out a subtle gasp of pain.

Once again, a liquid that tasted like iron stained my tongue, and I swallowed it.

The bleeding from her wound didn't stop.

But that was to be expected, since licking it wasn't going to stop the bleeding.

Every time her blood spread in my mouth, it felt like Miyagi was corroding my body, giving rise to goosebumps on my skin.

This wasn't good.

The order she gave me was absurd.

Well, you could say this whole order giving and obeying thing was kind of absurd to begin with, but what she was making me do right now was pretty bad too.

Thinking that, I bit down near her wound.

The inside of my mouth was being stained by the taste of her blood.

Even though I didn't want to swallow it, Miyagi's blood traveled down my throat once again.

「Open your mouth.」

Miyagi said in a subdued voice.

When I acted like I hadn't heard her order, she forcibly pulled her finger out and asked,

「Do you find human blood delicious?」

The taste of her blood remained in my mouth.

It was worse than soda. It felt like my entire mouth was covered with an unpleasant fluid.

「If I were a vampire I might think it was delicious. But I'm human, so no, I think it tastes horrible.」

「Just think of it as an iron supplement.」

Miyagi said, as if she had nothing to do with any of this.

I had no interest in drinking someone's blood as an iron supplement. Anyway, if I really had to let something become part of my body like that, liver would probably be more effective. Even though I don't like it, it'd be better than blood.

—— Oh.

Since I've eaten her blood, does that mean Miyagi has become part of my body now?

The thought of that made me sick to my stomach.

「I need to borrow a cup.」

Abandoning that train of thought, I went to open the cupboard before Miyagi could even reply. I grabbed a cup and immediately filled it halfway with water.

Gulp.

I glugged the water, trying to wash away any remaining traces of blood from my mouth.

After emptying the glass, I glanced over at Miyagi, whose finger was still bleeding.

「Give me your hand.」

I wasn't going to take no for an answer, so I didn't wait for a response.

I grabbed Miyagi's wrist and washed her bloodstained finger. This time, Miyagi did not resist, and she let me bring her finger towards the running water.

「I'll go grab some bandages, so wait here for a bit.」

I bet even if I asked Miyagi where she kept her bandages, she wouldn't tell me, so it was faster if I went to grab mine instead.

I went back to Miyagi's room and pulled my bandages – which were uncute, but claimed to promote healing – out of my bag. I quickly put my slippers on and rushed back to the kitchen, where I saw Miyagi staring at her own wound.

「Here.」

I handed the bandages to her.

「You're not going to stick it on for me?」

「Are you telling me you want me to?」

She did not reply. Instead, she simply stuck her finger out towards me.

If you get pampered too much, you're going to end up as a good-for-nothing when you grow up.

Right, you'd end up as a hopeless excuse of a person, just like Miyagi is.

A spoiled human being who couldn't even stick a bandage on herself despite already being in high school.

But this was probably an order as well.

Because of that, I put the bandage on her wound for her.

「You have precooked rice, right?」

I asked Miyagi, as I threw away the garbage from the plain but functional bandages.

「I do.」

「Okay, then go sit over there.」

「What about the cabbage?」

「It's fine. I'll just cut it myself.」

It wasn't like I was in a rush to get everything done, but I didn't want anything like the cabbage-cutting incident to happen again. If she cut her finger again, it'd just be a hassle to deal with.

After chasing Miyagi out of the kitchen, I cut the cabbage up while frying the chicken.

I didn't even bother asking this time, instead I just pulled out some plates, arranged the food, and served it up.

I placed the plates, along with some bowls of rice, onto the counter. After taking a seat next to her, the two of us uttered the usual, "Let's eat", in unison. Miyagi had a rather displeased look on her face as she chewed down on the karaage.

She took one bite, and then another.

But her expression didn't change.

「Does it taste bad?」

I asked, but she immediately answered with,

「It tastes good.」

I was happy to hear that something I cooked was delicious.

However, this was the first time I'd ever seen someone look so unsatisfied while eating something tasty.

「Sendai-san.」

「Hmm?」

「Why are you doing this?」

「I told you already, didn't I? I'm expressing my gratitude for all the times you've fed me.」

「You don't have to do this again.」

Miyagi said coldly, even though she was the one who told me it was delicious.

「Do you not like karaage?」

「It doesn't matter if I like it or not. You don't need to make it.」

At school, Miyagi didn't seem like the type to express any negative emotions. Sometimes, I'd see her in the corner of eyes and she'd look like she was having fun chatting with her friends, even laughing with them. But she was completely different when it came to me. Maybe it was because we were in her home – her territory, so to speak – but whenever I was around, Miyagi always seemed so terribly unstable.

But because of that, I wasn't going to let my guard down so easily around her either.

Dealing with people who were hard to read always left me feeling exhausted – it was so much work trying to figure out what they were thinking. And I already had my work cut out for me trying to stay in Umina's good graces.

「Say, Miyagi. Do you not cook?」

I asked, trying to change the topic to get rid of the awkward atmosphere in the room.

「It's not a problem for me even if I can't cook.」

「Do you want me to teach you?」

「I'm not going to end up making anything anyway, so you don't need to.」

「I see.」

Right.

I thought she would say something like that.

I wasn't going to force her to learn how to cook, so our conversation stopped there as I continued to chew on some more karaage.

I thought it was quite delicious, if I did say so myself.

Miyagi finished her dinner without saying another word.

Compared to the amount of time it took to cook the food, we finished our meals quite quickly. After that, I felt like I was being harassed as I was given an order to read a novel out loud.

Now in Miyagi's room, I was forced to read one long sentence after the other.

It continued like this for several dozens of minutes.

Naturally, I wasn't able to finish the whole thing in one day. After spending about a total of three hours at Miyagi's house, I left her apartment.

A few days later, Miyagi had called for me again, but she didn't ask me to cook for her and I didn't make anything for her either. But we still ate together. We even had dinner together sometime after White Day, but she didn't give me a return gift or anything.

I returned home, my habitual "I'm home" disappearing without a trace. In my room, I deposited another five-thousand yen bill in my piggy bank.

Just what was I expecting from Miyagi?

When I lifted my piggy bank up from my chest of drawers, it

felt neither heavy nor light.

I Know That Miyagi Doesn't Taste Good (IV)

Part 14

Miyagi's space heater was set a bit lower than it was in the middle of winter, but her room was still quite hot.

Spring break was just around the corner, so it should've been fine if she lowered the temperature a little more. Even though I found it hot in her room, Miyagi was currently reading manga with her blazer still on.

Aren't you a bit too sensitive to the cold?

If two people had different definitions of the "perfect temperature" and they were put in the same room together, then normally, they would probably work to find some sort of middle ground. Usually the guest would be given priority, but here, Miyagi's preferences always took precedence.

I didn't really mind that part, but I'd already taken off my blazer, so there was nothing else I could remove at this point. The top button of my blouse was undone already as well.

I got up from the bed and picked up my cup of soda. There was also a bag of popcorn sitting on the table.

It was kind of a rare sight, considering I was only ever served soda.

After quenching my thirst with the carbonated drink that I wasn't really a fan of, I undid another button on my blouse. Then, I grabbed two pieces of popcorn from the bag and tossed them into my mouth.

「Are you going anywhere for spring break?」

I asked Miyagi, who was sitting next to me, but she didn't respond.

What a tense atmosphere.

Ever since I'd gotten here, Miyagi appeared to be in a bad mood. Actually, it'd be more accurate to say she'd been in a foul mood for a while now. To be even more precise, things started going downhill ever since the day I made karaage here.

If that day was the cause of all of this, then Miyagi was being way too narrow-minded. Before, I would've said her mind was as narrow as a cat's forehead, but if you asked me now, I'd probably change my answer to a mouse's forehead instead[1].

I took the manga that Miyagi was reading from her hands. I turned to the front cover of the book and saw an image of a boy wielding a sword. As I flipped through the pages of the manga, I heard a voice speaking in a harsh tone next to me.

「What are your plans, Sendai-san?」

「Hmm, I'll probably hang out with Umina and the others. Oh, and I'll be attending a prep school.」

「Didn't you also attend prep school over winter break?」

「I did.」

When April rolls around, we'll be third years, which means we'll have to take entrance exams.

My path forward was already laid out for me: I was expected to follow in the footsteps of my accomplished older sister.

But that didn't really seem possible for me. My sister graduated two years before me, and had enrolled in a university that only accepted exceptionally intelligent people; my parents expected me to attend a university on at least the same level. If I wanted to accomplish that, though, I'd need to enroll in a cram school, and I'd already kicked that idea to the curb. At the very least, I was still expected to attend a prep school during the longer vacations – if I didn't, my family would probably kick me out of their house.[2]

「You must really like studying.」

「I don't really like it that much.」

I wasn't sure how Miyagi saw me, but what I said was the truth. I did enjoy studying in the past, but ever since my parents started using grades as a way to compare me to my older sister, I stopped liking it as much.

「Are you not going anywhere over the break, Miyagi?」

「I'm hanging out with my friends.」

「Like Utsunomiya?」

I asked, mentioning the name of our classmate that Miyagi was always with.

「Yes.」

Miyagi answered curtly as she took her manga back from me. She flipped through to just over halfway into the book, and started reading.

Our conversation ended there.

She hadn't said it explicitly, but I could tell just by looking at Miyagi: her attention was glued to the manga. With nothing else to do, I grabbed some more popcorn and brought it to my mouth.

You might be wondering, was it butter flavored? Or perhaps even caramel?

Those were two great flavor choices when it came to popcorn. However, in this room, there was nothing but pure salt. It was exactly what I would expect from Miyagi, and yet, I was still disappointed.

With nothing else to do to pass the time, I ate one piece of popcorn after the other – until Miyagi suddenly grabbed my wrist.

「What is it?」

「Let me feed you.」

And so, it begins.

Even if she didn't say it was an "order", I could tell it was one just by looking at the smile on Miyagi's face. But for some reason, I had a really bad feeling about what was going to happen.

Miyagi grabbed a handful of popcorn from the bag.

She laid all of the pieces out in the palm of her hand.

「Here.」

Miyagi said as she stuck out her left hand, which had quite a bit of popcorn in it.

Somehow…

Just… somehow, I could already tell what she was going to ask me to do. But I tried to dismiss the thought from my head and instead, reached my hand out, grabbed a piece of popcorn and tossed it in my mouth.

「Eat it out of my palm like a dog without using your hands.」

Before I could even chew on what I'd just put in my mouth, she pointed out my mistake to me.

Yep, I knew it was going to be like this.

No wonder she brought snacks out this time even though she usually never did. It was all for this.

There were times where I thought it'd be fine if she ordered me to be as obedient as a dog, but being told that I need to actually act like a dog didn't sit well with me. Still, an order was an order, so I did exactly what she asked for.

I turned to face her, bringing my lips towards the popcorn sitting in her palm.

And then, without using my hands, I started eating them one by one.

To be honest, as I continued pecking at the popcorn in her palm, I felt more like a pigeon than a dog. Curious as to how Miyagi was feeling about all of this, I lifted my head and saw a strange look on her face.

「Make sure you eat all of it.」

She pulled on my bangs as if urging me to keep going.

Even when it came to mundane orders like these, she still wouldn't let me off the hook that easily.

I continued eating from her hand, like a pigeon pecking at bread crumbs. Miyagi stroked my head every now and then, as if reminding me that I wasn't actually a pigeon, but a dog.

I felt incredibly ridiculous doing this. Nevertheless, I kept going until I ate all of the popcorn.

When I was finished, I licked Miyagi's empty palm.

Miyagi flinched and quickly tried to pull her arm back.

You were the one who told me to act like a dog, Miyagi.

I grabbed hold of the hand that tried to get away and pressed my tongue against it, only this time, I put more force into it. Starting with her fingertip, I slowly made my way towards the center of her palm, which tasted just like popcorn.

「Hmm, I think caramel popcorn might be better next time.」

I suggested after I was finished licking her hand like a dog, just as she asked for.

「There won't be a "next time".」

Miyagi said as she grabbed a tissue from the box that had a crocodile cover on it. She wiped the palm of her hand with it before crumpling it up and tossing it away in the garbage can. Then, without warning, she grabbed my necktie.

As I braced myself for what was to come, she took my necktie off. Without hesitation, she undid a button on my blouse. I swatted

her hand away out of reflex.

「Wait a sec, isn't this against the rules? I don't have any intention of getting into that kind of a relationship with you, Miyagi.」

Sure, I may have had two buttons undone on my blouse to begin with, but thanks to Miyagi, my cleavage was now exposed. Not that I had anything to lose if she saw it, but we didn't have the kind of relationship where I would just go ahead and let her undo a third button like that.

「You're assuming I want that sort of relationship with you just because I took off your necktie? Don't overthink it.」

Miyagi said with a tone as if to insist that it wasn't her intention. But from my point of view, she took off my necktie and then undid a button on my blouse. How could I not assume that that was what she was going for?

「Okay, then what are you trying to do?」

The answer to my question was more barbaric than I expected.

Miyagi untied my braided hair and aggressively shoved me by my shoulders.

This girl lived her life with no understanding of the word "moderation".

When she bit my finger back then, she caught me off guard with how much force she put into her bite.

And this time, she pushed me so hard that I lost my balance and fell over on the floor.

「Ow!」

It would have been better if I fell on the bed, but there was nothing on the wooden floor to cushion my fall. My arm and back hurt; I couldn't even get up because Miyagi sat herself down on top of me.

「I knew it. So you really were trying to take things in this direction.」

I tried to get her off of me.

「You're wrong.」

Miyagi said apathetically. When I glanced at her, she didn't look lustful or like she'd lost her senses or anything.

In that case, what was she trying to do?

Miyagi, with a calm and composed look on her face, reached her hand over to the table.

Huh?

Miyagi grabbed the bag of popcorn.

Not even a second later, I was showered with white puffs.

In other words, I just had popcorn dumped on me.

「Wha- Miyagi!」

My face, hair and blouse were all covered in popcorn.

I grabbed Miyagi by her necktie.

「If this is your idea of a joke, it isn't funny.」

I spent a lot of time doing my hair.

The hair treatment I used was expensive, and the hair dryer I owned was a special one that was able to generate negative ions.

I would've overlooked it if I was just having popcorn-shaped things being thrown at me, but I wasn't going to tolerate anything that left crumbs or powder behind. Getting that stuff in my hair was the worst. Needless to say, I was really upset.

「It's not a joke. I just thought maybe you'd want to eat some more popcorn.」

The expression on her face remained unchanged as Miyagi grabbed one of the fallen pieces of popcorn and stuffed it into my mouth. As if to vent my frustration, I bit down on both the popcorn and the finger that entered my mouth. Miyagi reached over and picked up a cup from the table.

「…… Seriously?」

The cup of soda hovered over me.

Miyagi smiled.

As she tilted the cup over, I closed my eyes out of reflex and let go of the necktie I was holding onto so I could use my hands to cover my face. Then, I felt the back of my hands getting wet, as if I had just gotten hit by a downpour of rain. When I opened my eyes, I saw that the cup she'd been holding was now empty.

「Now this is going too far.」

My voice naturally lowered itself.

「So even you can get angry sometimes, Sendai-san.」

I was only human, after all.

The only reason why I usually didn't get mad was because I was holding it in.

「Wouldn't it be weird if I didn't get angry? Especially when you pull something like this.」

「Well, I thought I was being rather considerate.」

「How, exactly?」

「Your blazer, necktie and skirt are all completely fine. Even if we didn't have time to wash your blouse, I have a replacement for you, so that won't be an issue either.」

「…… You're telling me you planned to do this from the very beginning?」

Miyagi stood up without answering my question.

With the weight of her body gone, I lifted myself up and shook the popcorn off me.

It was true that the only thing that got wet was my blouse.

But that didn't mean it was okay to throw popcorn or dump soda on other people. There were about a hundred different things that I had to complain about before I could even start to feel better. However, before I was able to open my mouth, a towel and long-sleeved shirt came flying in my direction.

「Wear that. I'll let you keep it, so you don't need to return it.」

Miyagi said before exiting the room.

Now that I had no one left to complain to, I took off my blouse and wiped my soda-covered hands and hair with the towel. When I looked over at the shirt that she tossed at me, I could tell that it was a bit big on Miyagi, but it was the right size for me.

I didn't want to wear it, considering what Miyagi had done to me earlier.

But I couldn't wear my blouse when it was still wet, so I put it on anyway. After I finished changing, Miyagi opened the door.

「I'll see you off.」

Miyagi, who had suddenly decided that I was going home on her own, said as she handed me a bag to store my wet blouse in.

I seriously couldn't believe she had the nerve to forcibly send me home at a time like this, but I also knew that Miyagi was a weirdo from the start. No one in their right minds could ever come up with this whole order-giving game and then drag their classmate into playing it with them.

I definitely had lots to complain about, but I was a willing participant in Miyagi's weird game – I should have expected things to go like this. And I never really had any reason to expect it'd get any less weird over time.

She gave orders. I obeyed them.

Since money was the only thing defining our relationship, there were bound to be days like today. It made things easier if I just thought of it like that and accepted it. But today, for some reason, I was left feeling unsatisfied.

「Sendai-san.」

Miyagi said, as if urging me along, so I put my coat on. Then, just like usual, the two of us left through the front door, rode the elevator down and walked all the way to the entrance of the apartment building.

「Bye-bye.」

Before I could even reply with, 「See you later」, Miyagi had already turned her back towards me.

「I'm going to give this back to you later!」

I shouted at Miyagi from behind.

My blouse may have been dirtied by Miyagi, but I didn't want to accept clothes from her just because she told me to. And just like when it came to money, I wanted to return the things that should be returned.

It was almost spring break, so the next time I'd see Miyagi was probably in April, when we were no longer second year students.

When I looked up at the sky, I could see countless stars.

There was no wind, and the weather was pretty warm for March.

If I connected some of the stars with a line, I could probably recognize a few constellations.

If nothing had happened today, I would've considered this a nice and peaceful night.

However, when I thought back to what went down today, I

couldn’t help but think it was the worst night ever. Just when I thought it could not get any worse, by the time I got back home, I found a pamphlet for the prep school I had to attend starting in April sitting on my desk.

I really didn’t want to go.

I couldn’t help but heave a huge sigh.

Chapter 5

Sendai-san Is Getting Overfamiliar (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 15

If I had to choose between whether I regretted it or not, I would say that I did. That was how I felt about what happened between me and Sendai-san the last time we saw each other.

Sendai-san had gotten unusually angry that day.

There were times where she'd look unhappy with the orders that I gave her, and other times, they would put her in a bad mood. However, she had never been so blatantly angry before.

That was the exact result I wanted.

And yet I found myself regretting it, just a bit.

"If only I hadn't done that."

The thought crossed my mind many times.

"But it was something that I had to do."

And each time, that was the reason I used to try and justify myself.

Perhaps because I didn't have anything specific planned over spring break, my head was being drowned by gloomy thoughts that I typically never had.

That was the first time I'd ever done something like that to another person.

I had never covered anyone in popcorn or soda before. In fact, the thought of doing so had never crossed my mind until now either.

Whenever I was alone in my room, I would always start having depressing thoughts. I had bought a few volumes of manga to keep myself entertained using the money I'd usually give to Sendai-san; however, I was hardly able to make any progress with reading them. None of the pictures or words were registering in my mind. All I was doing was flipping through the pages of the book while pretending that I was reading it.

I was currently laying in my bed as the sun's soft rays poured through my window. I lifted a hand to block the light from entering my eyes.

The wound that I got on the day Sendai-san asked me to slice the cabbage was already long gone. It hurt when I cut my finger, and even more so when Sendai-san bit on it, so I was glad that it had healed nicely.

However, I was a little bit curious about what sort of thoughts went through Sendai-san's mind when she licked my blood.

She was the sort of person who could've gone her entire life without taking orders from other people, and yet, in this room, she would obey all of mine without fail.

Not to mention, she would often do things that betrayed the image I had of her at school.

I expected her to use some cutesy-looking bandages, but instead, the one that she stuck on me was not cute at all and prioritized function above anything else. And unlike the cheery, sociable girl who was all smiles at school, she looked sloppy whenever she was in my room and would act like she owned the place.

Her sense of distance was strange as well.

She was always acting so overfamiliar, completely disregarding the other person's comfort zone.

She intruded in my life as if she had always belonged here.

Because of that, I felt like I was being thrown off my game.

「It's almost like we're friends or something.」

As I laid on the bed that Sendai-san was always on, I heaved a sigh. I reached out towards the stack of manga on the floor and picked one of the books up.

「Oh, this is volume two.」

I hadn't even read the first volume yet.

I picked up five more books from the stack in search of volume one, but it wasn't there, so I put the manga aside and grabbed my smartphone instead.

「I wonder what Maika is up to?」

Maika had told me she was attending cram school over spring break – when we met up two days ago, she had been on her way home afterwards, and the chances of her being there right now were high. Despite that, she was the first person that came to mind when I wanted someone to hang out with, and so I sent her a message saying 『I'm bored.』

However, as expected, she did not reply.

In that case, I had to dig through my phone to find someone else to talk to. I opened up my instant messaging app to look through my list of friends so that I could ask someone to hang out with me. As I scrolled down the list, Sendai-san's name caught my eye.

Since it was the middle of spring break, I couldn't call for her.

We had decided that we would only ever meet on school days, so seeing each other during our vacation was out of the question. However, we never said we couldn't contact each other, so even if I decided to send her a message or two, I wouldn't be breaking any rules. That being said, I didn't have anything I wanted to send to Sendai-san.

Considering the two of us had nothing in common, I didn't even know what I could even say to her.

The only reason Sendai-san had for coming over was money.

If it weren't for the five-thousand yen bills bridging us together, our relationship would not have been able to hold itself together on its own. But Sendai-san did not seem like she was in any particular need of money, so if she ever got sick of it, she could cut our ties at any moment she wanted to.

When we first started our arrangement, we didn't specify an end date. It could go on for a long time, but there was also the possibility of putting a stop to this silly farce just as quickly as it started.

I stared at my unscarred finger.

Just like how the wound from the kitchen knife had faded away, perhaps my relationship with Sendai-san would one day disappear as well. That day could be as soon as tomorrow, or it could be a year from now. Either way, all of this would inevitably come to an end.

Just like how my mother had suddenly disappeared one day back when I was still a child.

Even mothers could leave their children behind quite easily if they wanted to, so it wouldn't be surprising at all if Sendai-san – a person who I wasn't even related to – suddenly had a change of heart in our third year and decided she would never come to this room again.

That was why I covered Sendai-san in popcorn and soda the other day – to make her angry.

I had already grown so tired of waiting for other people that weren't guaranteed to show up, but if she had a good reason for turning down my summons that I could accept, then I wouldn't need to fear the day our arrangement came to an end. If Sendai-san no longer wanted to come over, then it would also give me a reason not to invite her anymore.

In any case, I should've been relieved that I'd created such a good and convincing excuse for myself.

But the reality was far from it. Instead of relief, there was a

part of me that felt like I shouldn't have done that to her. After all the time Sendai-san had spent in my room, I wanted to keep seeing her here.

All this should have ever been was a way to pass the time.

All I wanted was a distraction.

But if I sat on the floor, I would instantly be reminded of the day I had her feed me chocolate or when I made her do my homework. If I was on my bed, I would think of all the times she would roll around on it while reading manga.

This was all Sendai-san's fault.

I caressed my finger, which no longer had a wound on it.

If I licked my finger, it would not taste like blood.

I slowly lifted myself up from my bed and sat myself down next to the stack of manga volumes.

As I picked one up at random and flipped through the pages of the book, Maika replied to my message with, 『Well, I'm at cram school.』

『Want to go see a movie when you're done?』

『Can we move that to tomorrow?』

『Of course.』

I felt depressed because I was at home.

Going out would've served as a great distraction, and it was fun just hanging out with Maika.

It'd be nice if we ended up in the same class together even in our third year.

And as for Sendai-san——

Let's just say it like this: If we end up in the same class, then I'll continue calling for her, just like usual. If not, then this will be as

far as our relationship goes.

If I left the decision up to a coin flip, then I felt like I could rest easy.

That being said, even if I did continue to summon her, I wasn't certain whether Sendai-san would really show up or not.

The thought of that made my heart feel tense.

But there was nothing I could do about it.

『Where do you want to meet up?』

A message from Maika came in.

I replied with, "The same place we met at the day before yesterday."

Maika SS 1

Utsunomiya Maika's Thoughts

(Maika PoV)
Part 15-extra

I couldn't help feeling a bit jealous of Shiori. Just a little.

The reason why was because I was currently stuck at cram school. One of my lectures had just ended, and we were now in the middle of break time. I still had two more classes to go before I could go home. It wasn't that I was upset, but with it being spring break, this hardly felt like a vacation at all.

—— But I was the one who had agreed to do this.

I'd promised my parents that I would attend cram school over the break. With my third year of high school right around the corner, I figured it was a good idea to start preparing for the entrance exams. But there was still a part of me that wanted to go out and have fun —a pretty big part, actually. So, I felt a bit envious of Shiori, who had told me she wouldn't be going to cram school over the break. She was probably enjoying every moment of it right now.

I wonder what she's up to today?

A picture of my best friend's face drifted into my mind.

If Shiori were here right now, she'd probably complain about how much she didn't feel like studying. With that thought in mind, I took my phone out of my bag and saw a message from her. All it said was, "I'm bored.』

"That's so like her."

In person, Shiori was always chatty, but her texts were usually just a few words, like we were close enough friends that she didn't have to be careful with me. I replied,"Well, I'm at cram school,』 and then started doodling a portrait of her in my notebook.

She can be so absentminded sometimes.

She'd drift off in class, barely paying attention until a teacher would scold her. She'd usually take her homework seriously, though—if only she'd do the same in lectures.

Next to the doodle, I scribbled, "Concentrate!"

Shiori and I had been in the same class since our first year, spending time in the classroom and hanging out afterward. Our other close friend, Ami, ended up in a different class this year, but I hoped the three of us would be together again for our third year.

I drew Ami next to Shiori and wrote, "Cheerful!" over her head. Just as I was about to start doodling myself, I heard a voice from the seat diagonally in front of me calling my name. I looked up.

"I didn't know you were so good at drawing, Utsunomiya."

"I'm not that good. These are just doodles."

I replied to Honda-san, who was looking over at my notebook. We went to the same high school but were in different classes and separate friend groups, so we didn't usually talk much at school. Still, somehow, we ended up talking a lot here at cram school and got along well.

"They look pretty good to me. I can't draw to save my life."

"I really don't think I'm that good."

"Oh, come on, no need to be so modest."

Honda-san said with a smile and then casually added, "Oh, did you know Ibaraki-san has a part-time job?"

"She does? Where?"

I asked Honda-san, who was sitting diagonally in front of me, and with a grin, she replied, "At a family restaurant."

"A family restaurant, huh."

"Yeah, I went with my parents the other day, and we happened to run into her there. It's kind of hard to picture her working at one, right?"

"Yeah, that's pretty surprising. She doesn't seem like someone who'd work at a family restaurant. I would've expected her to work somewhere else."

"Right? Honestly, I didn't think Ibaraki-san would work at all. Doesn't she seem more like the type who'd always be out having fun? I bet she could get a bunch of guys to pay for things for her."

The image I had of Ibaraki-san was that she was "cute but short-tempered," and Honda-san's comments only reinforced it.

Ibaraki Umina—she was in the same class as me, yet she felt like a distant figure. So distant, in fact, that rumors about her had made their way to my cram school. I couldn't help but wonder what she was like at work.

"Is Ibaraki-san a good worker?"

"What do you mean?"

"I was just curious about how she was with customers."

"Oh, she was actually really friendly."

Honda-san said, as if it surprised her too.

"Really? I didn't expect that."

I'd repeated this so many times, but it really was surprising.

Maybe it was a bit unfair to say, but I had a hard time picturing Ibaraki-san taking her job seriously. Her other friends seemed more suited to part-time work.

I couldn't resist asking,

"Were any of her friends there too? Like Sendai-san, for instance?"

"Nope, didn't seem like it. But if Sendai-san worked there, I bet she'd be really popular."

"You mean, you think she'd be more likely to get confessed to?"

"Yeah. Ibaraki-san's cute but flashy, so I imagine she'd be harder to approach. But if Sendai-san worked there, doesn't she seem like she'd attract more attention?"

"I don't know which one of them would be more popular, but I can see Sendai-san being better suited for the job."

Just like how Ibaraki-san was a distant figure to me, so was Sendai-san. All I really knew about her was that she was friendlier than Ibaraki-san, with a reputation as a people-pleaser. Although the rumors about her weren't as intense as the ones surrounding Ibaraki-san, I'd still heard whispers that she was the type to "get around."

Even though we were in the same class, we'd never actually spoken before. So, I couldn't tell if any of the rumors were true or not—I just gossiped about them with my friends from cram school, and I doubted I'd ever have any direct interaction with either of them.

"You're right. Well, either way, they both seem really popular."

"Yep."

I gave a short reply, twirling my mechanical pencil around with my fingers.

It's not that I didn't look up to people like them, but popularity wasn't something you could gain just by wanting it. Besides, it wasn't like I wanted to be close with them anyway. I'd already chosen the friends I wanted to stay close to.

As I glanced down, the portraits I'd doodled in my notebook—the ones Honda-san had praised earlier—came back into view. Suddenly, I heard my phone vibrate. When I checked, I saw another message from Shiori that read, "Want to go see a movie when you're done?」

"Is that your friend?"

"Yeah."

I replied.

Shiori’s invitation was tempting, but if I met up with her after class, it would be too late to catch a movie.

If I were to go with her today, I’d have to rush to get home.

She’d seemed a bit down when I last saw her the day before yesterday, so if possible, I’d rather talk with her without feeling pressed for time.

After a moment’s hesitation, I texted back with, "Can we move that to tomorrow?」

Sendai-san Is Getting Overfamiliar (II)

Part 16

The end of spring break took too long to arrive.

Usually, it would be over in the blink of an eye.

This time, it felt like the hands of the clock had rusted in place – the break kept dragging on and on and on. It just felt needlessly long.

Finally, at last, April rolled around. With it came the new school year.

I was a bit anxious.

My footsteps felt heavy as I approached the school grounds.

Although we were forbidden from interacting with each other at school, I wondered how I should face Sendai-san when I saw her. Though, I had no idea if I'd have to face her at all – we changed classrooms at the start of the new year, so we might be in different classes.

I was fidgeting a lot, unable to calm myself down.

Our class lists were posted by the front entrance.

As I passed through the school gates, I saw a large crowd of people gathered around the relatively small pieces of paper.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Without making myself stand out, I took a deep breath in before exhaling. The first thing I did was search for my name on the list. After confirming which classroom I would be in, I looked further for the names of people that I knew. However, I didn't find Sendai-san's name there.

I wasn't expecting anything to begin with, so there was

nothing to feel disappointed about.

I sealed that thought away in my heart as I headed towards the classrooms that had formerly been home to our high and mighty seniors. When I opened the door, I saw Maika – who I met up with multiple times over the break – in the classroom.

「Over here, Shiori!」

Maika waved her hand around as she called my name.

I walked over to the desk she was sitting at.

「Good morning.」

「Morning, Shiori. Man, I had no idea what I was going to do if we ended up in different classes.」

「Same here.」

「Oh yeah, did you see that Ami's in our class too?」

Back in our first year, we were in the same class as our other friend, Shirakawa Ami, but we ended up being separated from her the year after. However, right as I wanted to celebrate the three of us being together again, I noticed she was nowhere to be seen.

「Yeah, I saw. Is Ami not here yet?」

「Nope, doesn't seem like it.」

「I see.」

Now that I knew Ami wasn't here yet, it felt a bit strange for me to look around for anyone else. But even though I knew there was no way I'd find Sendai-san, I found my eyes continued scanning around the room. Though, it would've been weirder if I had seen her in my class – her name wasn't on the same list as mine.

「Oh? Was there someone else you wanted to be in the same class as?」

Maika scanned the room, imitating what I was doing.

「No.」

「Whaat? You were totally looking for someone just now. Don't tell me, did you want to be in the same class as your crush?」

Maika asked, clearly poking fun at me.

「That's not it, and I don't have a crush on anybody either. I was just looking around to see what sort of people were in our class this year.」

「How suspicious…」

「There's nothing suspicious about that at all.」

Maika continued to stare at me with a doubtful look on her face.

「Seriously, it's nothing.」

I insisted as I let out a small sigh.

If we end up in different classes, then this will be as far as our relationship goes.

I thought back to the "little bet" I made with myself during spring break.

Sendai-san didn't start coming over to my house because of fate or anything. It only happened because of a coincidence followed by a series of whims that I had. In general, things like coincidences or whims never last very long, so an event like being put in different classrooms would probably be more than enough to end them. Plus, after what I did to Sendai-san the last time I saw her, I found it difficult to imagine facing her at all.

The only reason I was feeling down like this was because I would no longer see the face of a person I'd grown used to seeing in the classroom – there was no deeper meaning to it. This wasn't a bad thing, and it meant I didn't have a reason to call for Sendai-san anymore, either.

Eventually, Ami entered the classroom, and the homeroom teacher came not long after. After listening to the teacher drone on

and on for a while, we were finally dismissed and our first day of the new school year came to an end.

Maika and Ami invited me to go somewhere with them, but I turned them down, opting to go straight home.

Without changing out of my uniform, I plopped down onto my bed and pulled out my phone.

There was no particular reason for me to erase Sendai-san's contact information, but I didn't really feel there was much reason to keep it either.

We were in different classes – she would forget about me soon enough.

So there really wasn't much point in keeping her contact information.

There were a few things that put me in a bad mood in our first three days of school, and during those moments, I found myself instinctively reaching for my phone. However, by the fifth day, I was able to resist looking at my phone at all.

In any case, it wasn't all that uncommon to find people drifting apart after being placed in different classrooms.

A week had gone by since I made the decision to cut contact with Sendai-san. Yet, I found myself with the manga I made her read aloud to me the first time she came over in my hands.

On that day, I assumed she was going to read it well, but she was surprisingly bad at it. I stood in front of my bookshelf as I flipped through the pages of the book, recalling memories of how quiet she was while reading certain lines, or when she'd have difficulties bringing herself to say certain words.

I heaved a sigh as I went to take a seat on my bed.

When I closed the manga and put it by my pillow, I heard a chime from my intercom.

I hadn't ordered anything, so it couldn't have been a delivery.

I wasn't expecting any guests either.

Which meant that the person by the entrance was most likely just a salesperson or something of the sort. There was no reason for me to greet them, or even acknowledge them, so I decided to leave it be and turned on the TV instead. However, the intercom wouldn't stop ringing.

How persistent.

I raised the volume on the TV to block out the noise from the intercom, but just as I thought it was over, I heard a notification from my phone.

It was the sound of an incoming text message. I picked up my phone from the table. When I looked at the screen, I saw Sendai-san's name appear on it.

『Answer the intercom. I know you're there.』

Judging from the text, it seemed that the person ringing the intercom was none other than Sendai-san.

I was always the one who'd send Sendai-san a message first, whereas all she would do was reply to it.

That wasn't something we decided on, but it became an unspoken rule. Until now, she had never been the first to send a message, and she had certainly never come over uninvited.

『I've got some business with you, so hurry up and answer the intercom already.』

As I stared blankly at my phone screen, a new message came in. Immediately after, the intercom started ringing again. She kept at it, much like an elementary school student trying to pull a silly prank. I turned off the TV, got up and walked towards the living room. I took a peek at the intercom's monitor and just as I predicted, Sendai-san was standing right there. However, I had no idea why she came all the way to my apartment building when I hadn't even called for her.

「What did you come here for?」

I asked through the intercom.

「You read my messages, didn't you? I need you to open this door for me.」

Hearing Sendai-san's voice for the first time in a while made my heart thump.

But I wasn't going to open the door for her.

「No.」

「I have something to give back to you, so open it.」

「Something to give back to me?」

「Yeah, so open the door already.」

Sendai-san said, sounding a bit annoyed.

But the expression on her face was the same as usual.

Perhaps it was because she was outside, but she looked exactly like how she would as if she were still at school.

「What are you trying to give back to me?」

「The clothes that I borrowed last time. I made sure to wash them.」

The moment I heard her mention the clothes, I was instantly reminded of that day.

After I threw popcorn at her and doused her in soda, I gave her clean clothes to wear on her way back home. I did say that I was giving it to her, not lending it to her. I was certain those were the exact words I said, too.

Well, it didn't seem like she'd ever intended to keep the clothes – she had declared that she would return them later.

Sendai-san was a little too morally upright at times, which was sort of a pain. I didn't want to take back something I'd already given away, and I had no intentions of going back on my word

either.

「I told you that you didn't need to return it. Besides, I didn't ask you to come over today either.」

「I came over because you didn't ask.」

「Why?」

「I don't like feeling indebted to other people.」

Sendai-san said firmly.

I'm sure someone like Ibaraki-san would've kept it if she was asked to, but it seemed like Sendai-san was not that type of person. Even when I tried to give her five-thousand yen back at the bookstore, she was incredibly insistent on returning it.

「I said I was giving it to you, so you don't have to return anything.」

That was probably not enough to get Sendai-san to back down, though.

What a pain.

At this point, we were just going around in circles. Since our conversation had reached a stalemate, I decided I was going to hang up on her. However, right before I did so, Sendai-san said something unexpected.

「In that case, make it an order.」

「…… Huh?」

「I'm telling you I'll listen to you if you make it an order.」

「I don't get what you're trying to say.」

「I don't want to keep the clothes since there's no reason for me to do so. But if you order me to keep them, then I will. And if you don't want that, then at least order me to do something else, just like usual.」

Sendai-san spoke like it was nothing.

It was true that she would obey any order I gave her in exchange for five-thousand yen, so it wouldn't have been strange if I ordered her to keep the clothes. But there was something about being told to order her around that didn't sit well with me.

「Why does it take an order from me to get you to accept a single piece of clothing? I already said I would give it to you, so just take it. Now, go home.」

「If I leave now, I'm never coming back. Is that okay with you?」

She was trying to get me to stop her from leaving.

The voice that I heard through the intercom didn't sound very confident at all. If I had to say, she sounded incredibly angry, far beyond mere frustration.

Sendai-san Is Getting Overfamiliar (III)

Part 17

「You came all the way here just so you could get ordered around? Are you some kind of a pervert, Sendai-san?」

Go home.

That was all I needed to say. Yet, those were the exact words that I found myself unable to utter.

「I'm not as perverted as you are, that's for sure. So are you going to give me an order or not?」

She asked, pushing the choice onto me. She shouldn't have been able to see anything past the intercom, but it felt as though her gaze was piercing a hole in me through the monitor.

I couldn't stand the idea of Sendai-san ending this arrangement without a good reason – that's why I wanted to give her one right before the start of spring break. But despite everything that happened, she was here right now, standing on the other side of the intercom.

Sending Sendai-san home was a simple task.

However, if she left now, she would never come back.

「—— Fine, I'll open the door.」

I have no idea what her true intentions for coming over are.

So I'll let her in.

Just so I can find out.

Not because I'm trying to keep her around.

「Thanks.」

Sendai-san said as her silhouette disappeared from the monitor. Not long after, the doorbell rang and I opened the door for her.

Before taking off her shoes, Sendai-san directed my attention to a small paper bag she was holding.

「So, what are we going to do with this?」

Sendai-san asked, as if trying to confirm something with me.

Inside the bag were the clothes I had given to her the last time I saw her.

Once again, she was forcing me to make the decision.

Sendai-san waited for my answer.

「You came here because you wanted to be ordered around, didn't you?」

I said, turning my back to her without taking the paper bag from her hands. I heard the door closing and being locked behind me.

「Yep, that's what I said.」

Sendai-san spoke in a voice that was neither heavy nor light. As if leaving her behind, I headed straight for my room. However, her footsteps trailed closely behind mine like it was the most natural thing in the world. I opened the door and entered the room, with Sendai-san slipping in after me. Then, she sat herself on my bed, just like usual.

「Nothing about your room has changed, huh.」

It had been less than a month since the last time Sendai-san visited, but she spoke as if a whole year had gone by.

「There's no reason for anything to change.」

「I guess that's true.」

Her voice sounded light and fluttery, like flower petals

dancing in the wind. Then, she picked up the manga I'd left by my pillow.

「Isn't this the same manga from all the way back then? Were you reading this?」

I should've cleaned up a little before letting her in.

The manga I'd left on my bed was the one I'd ordered her to read aloud the first time she'd visited.

But it was too late for regrets now.

「So what if I was?」

「Oh, nothing.」

She wasn't laughing, but she was starting to sound more expressive than before.

Most likely, she was finding this amusing.

This is something I don't like about Sendai-san.

「Speaking of which, it's been a whole week already. How come you never called for me?」

She asked this nonchalantly, as if nothing had happened, while flipping rapidly through the pages of the manga.

「There were plenty of weeks where I didn't summon you as often.」

「Yeah, but up until now, you've never waited a whole week before calling for me, right? There's got to be a reason for this.」

「It's because we're third year students now.」

I gave her an answer that didn't exactly tell the full truth, but it wasn't entirely wrong either.

「Are you going to a cram school or something?」

「…… No.」

I had no plans of going to cram school.

I wasn't a big fan of studying, and I didn't have any strong feelings about going to university either. If there was a university out there that I could get into without much effort, then I would consider it. If not, then I'd just weigh my options later.

「Hmm.」

I wasn't sure if Sendai-san was convinced by my answer or not, but as she continued to flip through the pages of the manga she suddenly brought up Maika's name.

「So you're in the same class as Utsunomiya?」

「That's right. What of it?」

I hadn't mentioned anything about being in the same class as Maika to Sendai-san, and even if I wanted to, it wasn't like we had any opportunities to talk to each other. The fact that she knew about it meant that she'd gone out of her way to search for my name on the class lists during the first day of school.

… No, that couldn't have been it. Most likely, she was able to deduce it through a process of elimination – there were only two classrooms, after all. She was probably searching for her own name first and realized that if I wasn't in her class, it meant I was in the other one.

That's probably all it was.

I snatched the manga from Sendai-san's hands.

Whatever. It doesn't matter to me.

I put the manga away, hoping to shelve my unnecessary thoughts along with it.

「I bet you're disappointed that you're not in the same class as me.」

As I stared at my neatly arranged books lined up on my shelf, I heard her teasing voice from behind.

「I'm not disappointed.」

「Really? But I am.」

Her words sounded as if they carried no weight behind them.

When I turned around to face her, I saw Sendai-san grinning at me.

「Now you're just lying to me.」

「I'm not lying.」

She said, as if going out of her way to deny it. Then, she came up next to me and pulled out a manga volume from the bookshelf. I took the book from her and put it back where it belonged.

「I can order you to do anything I want, right?」

「You're seriously asking that now?」

「Well, I didn't pay you anything today, so I thought I'd confirm with you, just in case.」

「We can do the usual.」

Sendai-san said, her expression the same as it was on the days leading up to spring break.

Looking outside the window, I saw that the sky had been dyed in shades of red by the sunset. The houses and apartments I could see had taken on the same colors.

Now that spring was here, the days had become a little longer compared to the winter.

I no longer needed to use a space heater to stay warm.

Sendai-san kept her blazer on today, likely because the room wasn't as hot as before.

I closed the curtains, isolating us from the rest of the sunset-dyed world. Then, I sat down on my bed.

「Sit over there.」

I pointed at a spot in front of the bed. Just as she was told, Sendai-san took a seat on the floor. Then, she grabbed my leg.

「Next, you're going to ask me to take off your sock and lick your foot, right?」

「You're so used to this, huh.」

「It's only because you seem to really like ordering me to do this all the time.」

「It's not that I like it. I just don't have anything else I can order you to do.」

「Hmm, is that so?」

Sendai-san gazed up at me with a look of doubt in her eyes, so I kicked her on the shoulder and told her, 「Hurry up.」

「That's violence.」

「It's not violence.」

I expected her to continue talking back to me, but instead, she silently put her hands on my leg. She removed the sock that I was wearing, her fingers slowly gliding towards my heel. I could feel Sendai-san's gentle breath brushing against my foot until the sensation of something soft and warm took its place.

She pressed her tongue against my toes, wetting them.

The feeling of her tongue slowly making its way towards my instep was a bit disgusting. However, the fact that it was Sendai-san that was licking my foot made it feel good.

I didn't know anything about the class she was in.

But she was probably still sitting comfortably at the top of the school caste, enjoying every day alongside Ibaraki-san and her group. However, right now, that same girl was licking my foot.

As the tip of her tongue ran along my skin, I could feel Sendai-san's body temperature clearer than ever before.

Our heat collided, melting together before finally becoming a part of me.

Her tongue made its way towards my ankle.

Even though my space heater was turned off, the room felt a bit hot. I loosened my necktie to try and escape the heat, but I found my ankle being caught by her teeth as she began to suck on it.

It felt completely different from when she was just using her tongue, causing me to grab tightly onto my sheets.

「Sendai-san, don't do that.」

Her lips parted from my ankle as soon as I spoke.

Suddenly, she bit down on my big toe.

「Ouch.」

Her teeth dug into my flesh.

But she still didn't stop.

Granted, it didn't hurt as much as getting a finger caught in a door, but I shook my foot to get away from the sharp pain.

「Sendai-san, stop it.」

The teeth that were buried in my big toe slowly made their way out, the pain disappearing along with them. However, her tongue took its place as she gently licked my toe.

The sensation of a sticky tongue on my skin was rather unpleasant, but I didn't mind the feeling of Sendai-san's body temperature.

It felt as if the heat from the tip of my toes had traveled towards my stomach, warming up every breath that I took.

I wouldn't call this a good feeling, though.

「Sendai-san, how long do you plan to keep coming here for?」

I tugged on her bangs to get her to stop.

「Who knows? Maybe until we graduate? I mean, we'll probably end up going to different universities anyway. Oh, but if you tell me not to come here anymore, then I won't. Is that what you want?」

Sendai-san raised her head to look at me as she spoke with a serious tone in her voice.

"Keep coming over."

If I said that, we'd continue to see each other all the way until graduation.

But I didn't want to go out of my way to ask her to come over, so instead, I changed the subject and asked,

「You're planning to go to university?」

「Are you not?」

「I'm not sure. Which university are you trying to get into, Sendai-san?」

「I haven't decided yet.」

Was she saying that because she didn't want to tell me?

Or was she truly undecided?

Without knowing the answer to that question, the conversation ended there.

When I looked over at the curtains that were blocking out the sunset, it didn't seem nearly as bright outside as it did before.

As if she had nothing else to do, Sendai-san started caressing my ankle. The ticklish feeling startled me, causing my leg to flinch. Instead of voicing my protests, I lightly kicked her thigh.

「You know, Miyagi, I've never really been a fan of carbonated drinks.」

An unexpected confession came completely out of left field. It caught me so off guard that I reflexively let out a 「Huh? 」

「Isn't it a little too late to be saying that?」

I asked.

「When we first started this, I didn't think I'd be coming here so often, so I never found the right time to tell you.」

「…… I'm going to serve you soda again the next time you visit.」

「Wow, you're terrible.」

「Be quiet. Now, enough talking and more licking.」

Sendai-san pressed her lips against the top of my foot, which made a small sound.

The tip of her tongue brushed against my skin.

Her body temperature was mixed in with her touch, and it gradually became a part of me.

Her heat began to warm me up from the inside.

Her wet tongue made its way to my ankle.

And just as I expected, I found it a little disgusting.

Volume 1 Interlude

My Life, Before I Got Involved With Miyagi

(Sendai PoV)
Part 17-extra

Did their height lean towards the tall or short end? Were they inclined to follow the rules, or not? These were just a few among the many ways to categorize individuals, but today, my sole focus was on one particular division: people I knew, and those I didn't.

I was now entering my second year of high school.

As April arrived, all students advanced to the next grade, and it was time for us to change classrooms. Naturally, we had no control over who our new classmates would be.

Having just become a second-year student, I searched for my name, "Sendai Hazuki," on the class lists posted right in front of the school entrance. When I found my name, I noticed that "Ibaraki Umina" was written on the same list as mine. While I wasn't particularly shy, having a few familiar faces in the same class didn't hurt. Especially Umina; I considered myself lucky that we were placed together in the same class this year.

With her around, I could expect to cruise through my second year just like the year before. My position in the classroom would likely remain the same, so it seemed like smooth sailing ahead.

I scanned the lists one more time to see where my other friends were before heading to my classroom.

The atmosphere at school always felt a bit restless after returning from long breaks. Everywhere I went, I'd either hear other students reminiscing about how they spent their vacations or see people looking absentminded, as if half their bodies were still at home. There was a unique blend of excitement and anxiety in the air, probably because we were being welcomed into the beginning

of the new school year with unfamiliar classrooms and new classmates.

I walked down the noisy hallways before reaching my new classroom.

As soon as I opened the door, the first person I saw had a head full of light brown hair.

That person was none other than Umina.

She stood out no matter where she went.

Well, considering that was exactly what she was going for, it'd be more concerning for her if she didn't stand out. Nevertheless, the ability to accomplish whatever she aimed for was a talent in itself. She and I had our differences, but I admired that part of her. Umina was probably going to end up at the center of the class again, just like how it was in our first year.

I made my way towards Umina.

One step, two steps, three steps.

As I passed by a few desks, I heard a couple of voices that sounded excited, yet a bit sorrowful at the same time.

「I'm happy we're in the same class again this year, Maika, but…」

「It's kind a shame that Ami's not with us, huh.」

When I snuck a glance at them, the girls I saw seemed completely different from Umina.

Classroom changes were always a mixed bag of joy and sorrow.

While some were delighted to find themselves in the same class as their friends, others were sad at being separated from them.

It seemed that the girls I'd walked by had ended up being separated from one of their close friends, so they weren't entirely pleased with their situation. It made sense that the two of them

couldn't rejoice at being in the same class when their other friend ended up all alone.

Well, as much as I understood their feelings, I wasn't about to do anything about it.

I didn't know them well enough to randomly start a conversation with them. Out of the two categories I'd mentioned earlier, I considered those girls "people I didn't know", which also meant I had to learn their names later, so for the time being, I made sure to remember their faces.

I stopped in front of Umina's desk and called out to her.

「Good morning.」

「Oh, hey, Hazuki! Everyone said they're down to hang out after the entrance ceremony today.」

As soon as I greeted Umina, who was already surrounded by a bunch of people – some familiar faces, others not – she informed of me our after school plans. It seemed that nothing had changed from last year.

「Have we decided on where to go yet?」

I asked.

「That's what we were discussing before you came over. Oh, but before that, tell me about what happened.」

「What do you mean?」

「You know, what happened with Masaki-kun?」

The moment she mentioned the name of someone I'd rather not hear, a feeling of dread washed over me.

I knew she was going to ask me about him today, but I didn't really have much to tell her.

「What about him?」

I asked, feigning ignorance.

「Didn't Masaki-kun try to contact you?」

I did remember getting a call from him during spring break, but I'd never met nor spoken to him before, so I wasn't the one who gave him my contact information.

It must've been Umina.

Even though I hadn't granted her permission to set me up with a guy, she was requesting a status report from me. This wasn't the first time it had happened. She had done this numerous times before in the past. Umina was the type of person who enjoyed meddling and playing matchmaker for her friends. I knew she probably had good intentions, but since I had no interest in getting a boyfriend, I found it a bit bothersome.

「He did try to call me, but that was it.」

「Huh? You guys didn't hang out or anything?」

「Nope.」

「Why not?」

「We didn't really have much to talk about.」

「Does that really matter? Just talk about whatever. Don't you think it's kind of a waste to turn him down without hanging out with him at least once?」

「Isn't it important to share some common interests with your partner?」

「Nope, not really. I think your standards are way too high, Hazuki. You gotta be ready to make some compromises if you wanna find yourself a boyfriend. I can introduce as many guys to you as you want.」

「Thanks, but enough about me. How are things going with your boyfriend, Umina?」

Steering the conversation away from me, I asked Umina about the guy she'd been dating since our first year.

「Oh, him? He's been kinda getting on my nerves lately.」

「How so?」

Someone else asked. As I listened to Umina rant on in the background, I took a good look around the classroom.

The classroom felt like a fish tank where every student was like a creature that could be observed and ruthlessly compared to one another.

The power dynamics in the class had already been established on the first day.

There were no ordinary fish surrounding a flashy fish like Umina. Those around her either stood out as much as she did or were simply there to enjoy the benefits of being in her company.

But unlike the sea, here, the strong fish didn't prey on the weak.

Both the flashy-looking fish and the ordinary fish swam around each other to avoid any collisions.

I felt quite at ease within this aquarium, where tranquility managed to coexist with these power dynamics. I didn't particularly like the idea of being divided by a social hierarchy, but as long as I was able to establish a favorable position for myself, I had the freedom to swim wherever I wanted. Here, I was accepted by others even when my own family didn't accept me. As long as I played my cards correctly, it was guaranteed to be smooth sailing from here on out without me having to work too hard for it.

「Oh, I heard the fruit sandwiches they sell there are delicious.」

I snapped back to reality upon hearing Umina's bubbly voice.

The conversation had somehow shifted from Umina's boyfriend to a shop known for its cute and colorful fruit sandwiches.

「Let's go check it out after the opening ceremony. I also wanna shop for some foundation while we're at it.」

「Okay, sure.」

I replied with a smile. Thanks to Umina, my after-school schedule was now booked.

Every fish in the tank had a place to return to at the end of the day, but if I could, I wanted to delay that moment, even if just by a little bit. Each day, the thought of returning home to my family, who I viewed more as dolls than real people, filled me with dread. My own house served as a constant reminder that I could never become like the perfect doll my older sister was.

「Maaan, the opening ceremony seems like such a bore. Maybe I should just skip it.」

Umina grumbled. Her words weren't exactly what I'd call praiseworthy.

「Come on, the school day's almost over.」

「Yeah, but I still don't wanna go. Why don't you skip it with me, Hazuki?」

「It'd be a pain if the teachers caught us, so I'd rather not.」

I had no intentions of breaking the school rules on the first day, nor was I going to in the future. I wanted to avoid anything that would tarnish my reputation.

As soon as the bell rang, I went to take my seat.

In order to coast through my second year of high school alongside the other flashy-looking fish, establishing a positive first impression was crucial. I had no desire to ruin my standing with the teachers, and there was nothing to gain from becoming their enemy either.

From today onwards, I would live each day just like the one before, over and over again, as if I were caught in a loop.

Things would probably continue like this all the way until graduation.

This forever unchanging everyday life felt both liberating and constraining. It was enjoyable, yet mundane. Nevertheless, I managed to find contentment within my cramped daily routines. While I didn't mind introducing some variety every now and then, I found the intrusion of others, imposing unwanted changes on me, to be inconsiderate and unsettling. It was as though the concept of the perfect level of stimulation didn't exist.

So it was better not to change anything at all.

There was value in keeping everything the same.

I didn't want anything in my daily life to change.

At least, that was what I had thought to myself at the time.

Chapter 6

Miyagi Is Too Careless (I)

(Sendai PoV)

Part 18

For the first time ever, I went over to Miyagi's place without accepting a five-thousand yen bill from her. That day, I was practically brimming with dissatisfaction, but it gave me the courage I needed to see her. Instead of being paid with money, I was sent home with the clothes she gave me, which I stored by the drawers that my piggy bank rested upon.

Of course, it would've been better if she'd just taken the clothes back instead. In any case, the clothes were worth about five-thousand yen, the same price as an order – like the money, I had no intention of using them in future.

But that day was the only one that felt special.

A few days had gone by since then, and just like with any other visit, Miyagi paid me five-thousand yen again today.

However, some things have changed.

Miyagi served me barley tea instead of soda.

And she seemed a bit more chatty than usual.

I could understand being served barley tea, but I had no idea why she was suddenly so willing to talk to me. That being said, I found it a lot more enjoyable than just sitting around in silence all the time.

「Oh, that book was boring.」

This new more talkative Miyagi said when she noticed the romance novel I was reading. I raised my head to look at her.

「Really? I think it's pretty interesting though.」

「That one didn't have a happy ending.」

「Hey, isn't that a spoiler? I just started reading it, too.」

「It's fine.」

「No it isn't.」

The kinds of conversations we were having weren't really that deep, but seeing Miyagi so willing to speak with me reminded me of a stray cat finally letting me get close enough to pet it.

We started our little arrangement back in the summer, so about half a year had gone by since then.

When I thought about how long it took to get this wary stray cat to open up to me, I felt very touched.

But seriously, spoilers were off limits.

I closed the novel in my hands and tossed it onto the bed. Then, I swiped the manga that Miyagi was reading from her and turned over on the bed. I flipped through the pages of the book while hoping that she had no complaints.

It wasn't the first volume of the manga, but it didn't matter since I'd read the series several times by now. After getting through about a third of the book, Miyagi, who had been leaning by the bed, got up from her seat.

「Sendai-san, play a game with me.」

「A game?」

「Yes. This one.」

Miyagi pulled something out from below the TV. She was holding a case with a picture of a cartoonish car in her hands.

「It's no fun playing it alone.」

Miyagi said.

Judging from the case, she was probably talking about a racing game.

I thought back to the time I asked Miyagi if she played any video games. At the time, she said she didn't play any dating sims, but she also wouldn't tell me what games she did play.

Perhaps the answer to that question was in her hands right now. However, Miyagi didn't really strike me as the type to enjoy racing games.

How surprising.

That being said, I wasn't really sure what sort of games I was expecting her to like, but racing games definitely would not have been my first guess. Oh, but considering that the characters driving the cars were pretty well-known, there was a chance that Miyagi liked the game for the characters rather than the genre.

「Is this supposed to be a competitive racing game?」

I usually didn't play any video games, so I wanted to ask just to be sure.

「Yep. The idea is that you want to sabotage your opponents while racing to the finish line.」

「I don't actually know if it's possible or not, but couldn't you technically play this game with other people online?」

「…… You don't have to play if you don't want to.」

Miyagi said, suddenly becoming disappointed. I panicked a little when I saw her rushing to put the game away.

I was open to finding other ways to pass the time.

I enjoyed reading manga and novels, but it wouldn't hurt to change things up every now and then.

「It's not that I don't want to play, I just don't know how to.」

「I'll teach you.」

Miyagi said as she turned the console on. Then, she began her lecture.

However, the game mechanics were a lot more complex than I expected, so I couldn't remember them all.

Halfway through the lecture, Miyagi seemed like she was starting to get tired of teaching me and her explanations were becoming less and less detailed, so I decided to interrupt her.

「Oh, right. I'm enrolled in a prep school now, so there are some days I won't be able to come visit.」

「Prep school?」

「I mean, we do have entrance exams to worry about this year, so it can't be helped.」

If I were able to get into the university that my parents wanted me to go to, then perhaps things could go back to how they were when I was a child.

To me, passing the university entrance exam was my last chance at reconciling with my family.

But the truth is, I felt like somewhere down the line, I'd already stopped caring about my family. There was no way I was getting into the university of their dreams, and even if I did get accepted, I'd probably end up rejecting the offer anyway.

Despite that, I still wrote the name of that university down as my desired school on my prep school application form.

—— Even though I was well-aware that starting prep school this late in the game wasn't going to change a single thing.

I lay on the bed with my stomach facing up as I stared at the ceiling.

The colors of the room were completely different from mine and yet, it was starting to feel familiar to me.

「I don't mind if you stop by after class.」

Migayi's tone made her emotions difficult to read.

「Well, the classes end pretty late, so that might not be possible. I usually get home around midnight on those days.」

「In that case, if it turns out you have to go to prep school when I call for you, then just come the day after.」

「Got it.」

After sorting that out, Miyagi finished with her basic rundown of the game and started a race. However, my car didn't seem to move the way I wanted it to.

I leaned my body to the right, hoping the car would do the same, but the action came delayed.

The same thing happened when I leaned to the left.

And just when I thought I had a straight path ahead of me, I suddenly started spinning, and Miyagi quickly overtook me.

How annoying.

This was definitely the car's fault, not mine.

Plus, Miyagi was bullying me too.

She kept throwing things like banana peels or bombs at me to get in my way. Because of that, Miyagi won pretty much all of the races, and I couldn't win any.

「Go easy on me, Miyagi.」

「I don't want to.」

「I'm only a beginner.」

「I know.」

「Ah, geez. Let's take a break already! I can't win a single race. It's not fun.」

I tossed the controller away in the middle of the race and decided to drink some barley tea instead. In the meantime, Miyagi's car continued to speed towards the finish line and ended in her victory.

「Sendai-san, you're pretty bad at this.」

Miyagi, who spared me no mercy, said as she put her controller aside and stretched her legs out.

While I wouldn't call her super talkative, she really was speaking a lot more than usual today. I don't know what she and Utsunomiya were like together, but I'd imagine Miyagi was more like this with her friends – open and sociable.

Is it about to snow tomorrow or something?

I stared in Miyagi's direction while I was having that rude thought about her.

Even though we were third year students now, nothing about her had changed.

She still wasn't into doing her makeup and nothing really looked out of place about her uniform, save for her slightly shortened skirt.

If anything, she was playing it too safe.

Hypothetically, if everyone was lined up, then the teachers would probably notice the difference in skirt lengths. However, I doubted that the teachers would have anything to say even if our skirts were just a bit shorter than normal.

Hmm, maybe she could get away with about this much?

As I lightly messed around with her skirt on my own, I noticed a bruise around her knee.

「What are you doing all of a sudden?」

When I pulled on her skirt, Miyagi shot me a glare.

「You've got a bruise on your knee.」

「I bumped into something at school.」

「Does it hurt?」

Without even waiting for an answer, I poked at her knee under the table. She immediately swatted my hand away in response.

「It doesn't hurt, but what if it did? Why are you poking it?」

「I just felt like it.」

「If you're that bored, we can always keep going with this.」

Miyagi said with a displeased look on her face as she handed a controller over to me.

It wasn't like I found the game uninteresting or anything, but I just didn't want to lose anymore. Or I guess it was more accurate to say that I would've found it more fun if I could win at least once.

As I considered different ways to get Miyagi's mind off the game, I suddenly remembered something.

「Oh yeah, did you know that if you cut up a lemon and squeeze a couple drops on a hickey, it makes it disappear faster?」

「I didn't know that. Is this what people with that sort of experience talk about all the time?」

Miyagi asked, most likely because of those baseless rumors people spread about me. Something about how I was just "acting pure, but fooling around in reality". In any case, I made sure to firmly deny it.

「Look, I'm not experienced. When Umina had some hickeys that she needed to get rid of, she tried the lemon trick for herself and then told us about it.」

「Don't tell me… You want to try it on my bruise?」

「Yep, that's right. I just thought that, you know, since

bruises and hickeys are both types of internal bleeding, we might end up with similar results.」

「I doubt it. Besides, did Ibaraki-san's hickey really disappear that quickly after squeezing lemon on it?」

「It did disappear, but it probably would've gone away on its own anyway. Well, I've also heard that applying either hot or cold things can help as well, so why not give it a try?」

「I've already had the bruise for two days now, and it's not like I'm in any rush to get rid of it.」

Miyagi brushed off my suggestion like it was a too much of a hassle. She set her game controller down and took a sip of her soda. As if her desire to continue playing had disappeared, Miyagi turned off the console.

Now that I managed to accomplish what I set out to do and freed myself from having to play more, I picked up the manga I put aside earlier. However, before I could even flip a single page, Miyagi tapped me on the shoulder.

「Oh, I know. Let's do an experiment.」

「An experiment?」

「Yep. Let's start with you taking off your blazer for now, Sendai-san.」

For some reason, Miyagi sounded more energetic than usual.

I suddenly had a bad feeling about this.

「Is that an order?」

「It is. Hurry up and take it off.」

Miyagi commanded, leaving me with no room to argue.

Miyagi Is Too Careless (II)

Part 19

I had no reservations about taking off my blazer.

I mean, I'd done it many times in this room before.

However, Miyagi had never asked me to take it off before.

「Before we do anything, I want to know what sort of "experiment" this is going to be.」

I felt like I could already guess what was going to happen in this "experiment", but I wanted to confirm it before doing anything else. If I was right, nothing good was going to come of it… not to mention, it wasn't exactly appropriate, considering the kind of relationship we had.

「I'll tell you once you take your blazer off.」

I knew you were going to say that.

I let out a small sigh.

Obviously she wasn't going to answer me honestly. She knew she was up to no good – otherwise there would've been no need to hide it. However, if it was just removing my blazer then it didn't break any rules. I did as I had been told, and placed my blazer on the bed.

Her next order followed immediately.

「Roll up your sleeves.」

"Unbutton your blouse."

At least, that was where I thought the testing site would be, but apparently not.

「But why?」

I already had an idea of what she was going to do, but I thought I would ask, just in case.

「You said that hickeys could be erased with lemon juice, right? I want to experiment on your arm and see if it's true or not.」

Sometimes – actually no, most of the time – Miyagi would say things that didn't make any sense.

She wanted to give me a hickey and then get rid of it.

I already knew that was what she wanted to do.

But I seriously had no idea why she wanted to do it.

「You do realize that if this experiment fails, it's only going to create trouble, right?」

「That's why I want to try it on your arm. You should be able to cover it up under your blouse, so I don't see the problem here.」

「Oh, no. There is a problem.」

She would be leaving a mark on my body.

Miyagi and I didn't have that sort of relationship. The connection between us wasn't like that at all.

Sure, we've licked each other and bit each other before, but we've never left behind any long-lasting marks.

But what she was asking for now was different.

Even if it was hiding under my school uniform, if the lemon juice didn't work, my body would be haunted by Miyagi's mark for the foreseeable future.

Needless to say, I was not into that idea.

「I'm not doing it over here, so it's fine, isn't it?」

Miyagi said as she casually brushed her hand against the side of my neck.

Her fingertips slid down towards my collarbone. I had two buttons open on my blouse, so if she thought she could get away with it, she might have gone even lower. I wasn't going to let her do that, though, so I swatted her hand away.

「If you even think about leaving a mark there, I'll beat you up.」

「Beat me up? Sendai-san, I think you've forgotten that you're supposed to be a "pure and innocent" character.」

「You also act like a completely different character from what I see at school, so it's fine, isn't it? I can act however I want.」

「Sure, I don't care what kind of character you want to be. Just roll up your sleeves already.」

Miyagi commanded as she grabbed my right arm, as if emphasizing that her orders were absolute.

I had plenty of reasons to refuse.

For example, the hickey would be visible when I change into my gym clothes for physical education.

With that reason alone, I could've called foul on this order, and it probably would've been enough to get Miyagi to back down.

However, I did exactly as I was told.

I undid the button on my sleeve and exposed my arm to her.

「Here. Is this good enough?」

While I didn't think our relationship was so fragile that it'd crumble over a single rule violation, I wasn't sure if Miyagi thought the same. She was pretty capricious.

I'd always felt like she kept me at a distance, but for some reason, she seemed closer than ever today.

But just like her change in behavior today came out of nowhere, it wouldn't be a shock either if she suddenly said she

didn't want to continue paying me five-thousand yen.

"Sendai Hazuki is well-liked by her peers and teachers alike."

I needed a place where I could take that mask off, and just be myself. Miyagi's home had become that for me – a place where I could be free from those worries. I needed it, and I needed Miyagi because of that.

「Hmm, should I do it here?」

Miyagi mumbled to herself as she poked my forearm. She'd set her sights on the space between my wrist and my elbow.

「Do what you want.」

「I don't need you to tell me that.」

I know.

I replied in my head as she brushed her hand against the soft inner part of my forearm, as if she were preparing me for an injection.

After a brief pause, she pressed her lips against my arm.

However, it felt nothing like a prick from a needle would.

Her tongue touched my skin, and she slowly began to suck on it.

It didn't make me feel anything in particular.

Things like being licked or getting bit really drove home the feeling that it was someone else doing it to me, but not this.

So this didn't really seem like that big of a deal.

All she was doing was putting her lips and tongue on my arm. It didn't hurt at all.

However, even though her lips and her tongue weren't supposed to be that hot, I felt like I was burning up.

「Hey, that's enough, isn't it?」

I said as I pushed her head away.

Miyagi lifted her head, and the skin that felt like it was being sucked up by her returned to its original position.

「I think I did it correctly. I suppose we can call this a success.」

When I lowered my gaze, I saw a red mark on my arm that was clearly visible.

It didn't look all that different from when I tried doing it to myself back when I was fooling around as a kid, and it looked pretty similar to the hickey that Umina had on her neck. However, the only difference was that this mark was made by Miyagi.

I couldn't help but sigh.

Unlike when I was a child, I knew what these marks meant when they were left by other people.

This sort of thing would appear often in the manga books that Miyagi liked to read. A red mark like this was a proof of connection.

I attempted to wipe the mark off with my palm as if I were trying to scrub off dirt.

If this was Miyagi's way of claiming ownership of me, that'd be pretty troubling.

Well, most likely that wasn't her intention and I was just overthinking things… but I really didn't like that she'd left something on me that would make me think of her every time I caught a glimpse of it.

—— I swear, if this thing doesn't disappear quickly…

As I continued to keep my arm warm with my palm, I asked:

「So… You do have lemons at home, right?」

「You've seen the inside of my refrigerator, haven't you?」

Indeed, I'd seen her fridge before, back when I made karaage for us.

… And it was incredibly empty.

So I already knew the answer to my question.

I doubted she had any lemons.

In fact, I'd already suspected it from the start.

I squeezed my hand against the mark that Miyagi left behind.

「It'll be fine since you can conceal it under your uniform, right? Plus, you did say you could make it go away by using something hot or cold. Why not try experimenting with that instead?」

Miyagi said as if she had absolutely nothing to do with this.

I felt irritated.

Incredibly so.

I unrolled my sleeve and buttoned it back up.

「Alright, Miyagi. You do it too. Take off your blazer and give me your arm.」

「What is this? Are you giving me an order?」

「It's not an order. It's just a request.」

Since I was the one being paid five-thousand yen, I didn't have the right to order her around.

In that case, I had no choice but to pass it off as me asking for a request.

「Is that the attitude you have when you're requesting something from someone?」

「Yep.」

「Maybe if you asked me properly, then I'd consider it.」

And why, pray tell, do I have to bow my head to you?

Miyagi had no intention of conducting a proper experiment to begin with, and yet, she was the kind of person who'd frame it as one just so she could leave a mark on me.

I shouldn't have to lower my head to her.

That was what I thought to myself.

However, I did exactly as I was told and rephrased my request.

「…… Please give me your arm.」

If I was going to go down, then I wanted to drag her with me.

And in order to achieve that, some sacrifices had to be made.

Miyagi Is Too Careless (III)

Part 20

「You can leave a hickey here if you want.」

Miyagi readily accepted my request as she took her blazer off.

She rolled up the sleeve on her blouse and stuck her arm out towards me.

No.

This is all wrong.

It wasn't like I wanted her to resist or anything, but I also didn't want her to agree so easily. I wanted to drag her down with me, not have her meet me down here on her own accord.

Now it felt like I was just copying Miyagi, which only made me feel more annoyed.

Miyagi should've been confused, just like how I was. She should've been irritated instead of giving me the go-ahead to plant a hickey on her.

「You know what, never mind.」

I unrolled Miyagi's sleeve for her.

Honestly, there was no reason for us to be leaving hickeys on each other in the first place.

I really don't care anymore.

I took a deep breath to calm myself down. However, Miyagi let out a breath before I could.

「Even though you were the one who asked me for my arm?」

「I mean, this isn't something that friends should be doing with

each other anyway.」

Regardless of our reasons for meeting up, Miyagi invited me to her home after school hours and we spent a lot of time together, so I considered her a friend.

Our friendship was a bit unique compared to traditional ones, but she still fit the criteria of a “friend” in general.

「—— You and I are not friends, Sendai-san.」

Oh.

That explains a lot.

I was finally able to make sense of some of Miyagi’s actions up until now.

Now I understood why she had that strange expression on her face when I gave her friendship chocolate on Valentine’s Day. It also explained why she told me not to make dinner for her.

She never saw us as friends – that’s why she would always issue me these orders that were so obviously out of the ordinary.

However…

If that was the case, then what sort of relationship did we have?

At least, I considered Miyagi my friend.

Sure, we never hung out except on school days, and we kept our contact to a bare minimum, but if I could go over to her house and engage in banter with her, then she was definitely a friend to me.

Looks like it was different for Miyagi, though.

「If we’re not friends, then what are we?」

I asked out of genuine curiosity.

「Don’t ask me. I have no idea either.」

Miyagi sounded angry as she spoke. Then, she rolled her sleeve back up.

「Here.」

She said curtly, extending her arm out to me.

To be honest, it felt pretty bad hearing someone who you considered a friend deny it so strongly. But when I really thought about it, Miyagi and I didn't exactly have the kind of relationship where a label was worth stressing over.

Things just happened to turn out this way, after all.

I was simply interested in Miyagi as a person, and wanted to see what kinds of orders she would give me. And if I was ever unhappy with the arrangement, all I had to do was return the five-thousand yen to her and be done with it. That was the sort of mindset I had going into this.

The five-thousand yen was like a thin string tying our fragile relationship together.

But unlike how Miyagi treated me on that day she drenched me in soda, she wasn't actively pushing me away today – I wanted to be extra careful with choosing the right words to describe our relationship.

「Look, I'm not your lover, Miyagi.」

「Do we have to be lovers to leave hickeys on each other?」

「Isn't that how it usually works?」

「How come you're acting so pure and innocent all of a sudden? Even though you look like the type to get around.」

「I'm not acting that way, I am pure and innocent. And I already told you, I don't get around.」

I could tell Miyagi was just saying that to provoke me.

But I needed to defend myself from those disgraceful remarks that she kept bringing up from time to time.

「If you insist, Sendai-san…… Anyway, aren't there plenty of people out there who do these things to each other even if they aren't friends or lovers?」

「Yeah, there are, but I'm not one of them.」

「You can't really say that after you let me – someone who's not your lover – leave a mark on you.」

I see.

I guess she has a point there.

—— Wait, wait, no she doesn't.

Even though I let someone who wasn't my lover leave a hickey on me, that didn't mean I belonged in the same category as those who actively sought to do these things with people that weren't their partners.

Moreover, when Miyagi asked me to put a hickey on her, it only made me not want to do it. I know I was the one who said I would, but seeing how readily she accepted it made me want to run away.

「Okay, then I'll give you an order.」

When she saw that I wouldn't budge, Miyagi chose to use the words she knew I couldn't defy.

「Do the same thing to me as I did to you earlier.」

Her voice sounded like she wanted me to do this to prove that we weren't friends.

She was definitely trying to test my loyalty[1].

She wanted me to make it loud and clear that the relationship we had was not friendship.

I'm sure that was what she wanted to get out of this.

「Fine.」

I understood the intention behind her order, but that didn't necessarily mean I agreed with it.

Still, I reached out and grabbed her arm. Then, I parted my lips and pressed them against the same area that Miyagi marked on me earlier.

I sucked on her skin, as if I were trying to inhale it. A subtle noise that sounded like a kiss came from my lips and echoed in my ears.

The tip of my tongue brushed against her skin, but it didn't really taste like anything.

It didn't feel anything like the times I bit her either.

I continued sucking on her skin like I was trying to drink through the straw of a juice box.

The skin that was currently beneath my lips felt cold and soft to the touch.

It wasn't an unpleasant feeling.

I squeezed my lips together a bit harder and took another deep breath in.

Right when my teeth were about to sink into her skin, Miyagi gave me a shove on my shoulder, and I lifted my head to face her.

「It's a lot redder than I thought it would be.」

Miyagi said, which prompted me to drop my gaze to examine her arm.

There was a red mark on her that resembled the shape of a flower petal.

「So what are you going to do with this?」

I said as I poked the mark that I made on her.

「I'm not going to do anything with it. I'll just leave it alone.

It'll disappear on its own anyway. As for you, Sendai-san, you can go around telling people your boyfriend left a hickey on you.」

「I don't even have a boyfriend, and I don't really want to say anything that could lead to a misunderstanding.」

Thankfully, I didn't have gym class tomorrow, so I didn't need to change my clothes in front of anyone else.

No one should be able to find out about the traces that Miyagi left on my body.

Well, I did have gym class a few days from now, but I wanted to believe that the marks would be gone by then.

「Hey, Miyagi. Don't you think you've been acting a bit strange today?」

I squeezed my arm over my blouse, right where the hickey was.

She had a lot more to say than usual, and she even pulled out a video game for us to play together.

In fact, it felt like she'd put the whole order-giving thing on the back burner.

「I don't think I'm acting any differently than usual.」

「No, you definitely are.」

「In that case, I'd say you were acting pretty strange yourself, Sendai-san. You've never given me an order before.」

「That's true, but…」

「That aside, can I undo this button?」

Without warning, Miyagi brought her fingers to the third button on my blouse and pulled on it slightly.

I didn't have any good memories associated with that button.

My brows naturally furrowed as I thought back to the day she drenched me in soda.

「No. Besides, what were you even thinking of doing?」

「I thought I'd leave a mark here too.」

Miyagi said as she let go of the button. Instead, she slid her fingers beneath my collarbone.

「Didn't I tell you I'd beat you up if you even thought about putting a mark there?」

「You didn't really seem to dislike it when I put a hickey on you, Sendai-san. Besides, you only ever leave one button undone at most whenever you're at school, so it's not like anybody would see it.」

Sounds like someone's been watching me.

What Miyagi said was true. Whenever I was at school, I'd keep one button undone at most, and I never really loosened my necktie either.

I was breaking a few school rules, but I made sure that nothing stood out enough for the teachers to scold me. Even if Miyagi left a mark around the area she was currently pointing to, no one at school would ever notice it even if I changed clothes in front of them.

But that didn't mean I was okay with her leaving a hickey there.

「That's not the issue here.」

「It's fine, isn't it?」

Miyagi acted without giving me an order and suddenly took off my necktie while undoing the third button on my blouse.

And without asking me, she brought her face towards my now exposed cleavage.

Her breath tickled the side of my neck.

A distinct heat, clearly belonging to someone other than myself,

approached the area that she had been touching earlier.

Her hair brushed against my skin, making me extremely conscious of what was happening.

It felt like all my senses had gathered into one spot. Unable to handle it, I pushed Miyagi away.

「Stop that.」

「You're no fun.」

Miyagi said, sounding a bit disappointed, but she backed off without resistance.

Instead, she used her fingers to pinch the area where she had intended to leave a hickey. Then, she applied firm pressure to my skin through my blouse.

「Ow!」

I shouted reflexively.

I grabbed Miyagi by her arm, but her hand wouldn't budge.

「I can leave some sort of a mark on you like this as well.」

Miyagi said as she applied more force to her fingers.

She was pinching me so hard, it wouldn't have been an exaggeration if I said I genuinely believed she was trying to tear my flesh off.

「I told you, that hurts!」

「This is just a little prank.」

「Are you stupid? This isn't a joke!」

「It's not like I could actually leave a hickey on you like this anyway.」

That wasn't the point.

It was just plain painful.

It hurt so much that I couldn't even play it off as a prank of hers.

Normally, people wouldn't even think about leaving marks on others by pinching them.

I swear, there are no screws holding Miyagi's common sense together in her head…

But even if I told Miyagi that all the things she's been doing to me went beyond the realm of common sense, I'm sure it'd just be lost on her anyway.

I let out a small sigh.

「Do you want to have dinner here?」

Miyagi asked in a professional, business-like tone.

「Yeah, I'll have something to eat.」

I mean, even if I went home now, I'd just be dining alone anyway.

If that was going to be the case, then I'd rather eat with someone else here.

I fastened up the button that Miyagi undid earlier.

「You're okay with anything, right?」

「Yeah.」

When I answered Miyagi's question, she got up without saying anything more and left the room, as if nothing just happened.

I put my blazer back on and stared at my arm.

Of course, I couldn't see the mark that Miyagi left behind through it or anything.

「Maybe I should've refused the order after all.」

I muttered to myself as I followed after Miyagi.

Perhaps my existence was necessary to Miyagi.

Just like how this place was to me.

Anyway, even if we were necessary to each other, things like what happened today needed to stop.

There was a clear limit to our relationship. Once we were finished with high school, our arrangement would be over as well. In the grand scheme of our lives, this phase would likely occupy only a small portion of the whole picture. But even so, things like leaving hickeys on each other made me feel like we were going to be bound together for a long time to come, and the mere thought of that made my stomach feel heavy.

I wonder how long this mark will stay on me.

I held my arm out as I walked towards the living room.

[1] Honestly, I'm not sure if this is footnote worthy, but I thought I'd include it for the language or history buffs out there.

In the original text, Sendai says: 「きっと、踏み絵みたいなものなんだと思う。」, which roughly translates to: "She was definitely trying to get me to do something like fumi-e."

Basically, fumi-e was a test of allegiance used by the authorities of the Tokugawa shogunate back in the 1600s. Christianity was banned back then, and those that were caught being a Christian would be persecuted or executed.

The "fumi" (踏み) part in fumi-e means "to step on", and the "e" (絵) means "picture". The idea was that if an individual was suspected to be a Christian or a sympathizer, they were given a picture of Jesus or the Virgin Mary and they had to prove their allegiance by trampling on it in order to escape death.

This must sound pretty wild considering Sendai and Miyagi are just two high school girls in the modern era, but essentially, it just means "test of allegiance" now. There is no religion involved here.

Chapter 7

I Want to Hear Sendai-san's Voice (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 21

Maika was enrolled in a cram school.

Sendai-san attended a prep school.

In both of their cases, they were told by their fathers that if they went, their tuitions would be covered. Though, truth be told, I wasn't sure what the difference between a cram school and a prep school was.

Both places had something to do with studying.

That was the only thing I knew about them.

I wasn't interested in attending either of those myself, so I felt a bit bad about calling Sendai-san over all the time. I decided to limit myself to summoning her once a week.

Usually I'd tell Sendai-san to come over whenever I was having a bad day, but recently I would try to put up with as much as I could.

That was a decision I made after Sendai-san left last week.

However, I found myself wanting to invite her over already.

「I don't want to do anything anymore… 」

I leaned back in my chair and heaved a sigh. Maika, who was sitting across from me, laughed as she said,

「You sure got roasted alive today, Shiori. Talk about unlucky. 」

「Seriously, that was so unlucky. Tigerhashi was in such a bad mood.」

Ami was sitting next to Maika. She was referring to one of our teachers, Takahashi-sensei, who always seemed to be dressed in blue. I thought back to the class that had just ended. Now that Tigerhashi wasn't around anymore, I was free to voice my complaints.

「I wish he'd stop using us as punching bags. Seriously, he's just the worst.」

Tigerhashi was our world history teacher who had a reputation for taking his anger out on his students whenever he was in a bad mood. Even before class began today, he was scowling and had a deep wrinkle between his eyebrows.

Please don't let it be me.

That was the prayer I made, yet fate had a different plan; I became his primary target. He continuously prodded me with unanswerable questions, followed by incessant nagging when I couldn't respond. He kept singling me out, sprinkling in a few snide remarks, before finally returning to the staff room. As a result, I could feel my energy levels plummeting beneath the earth.

「I want to go home already.」

I muttered while putting my textbooks and notebooks away in my desk.

「I get how you feel, but we have gym class next, so we better get moving soon.」

Ami said as she nudged me.

「Yeah, I know.」

I replied as I stood up, holding my gym clothes in my hands.

The three of us left the classroom together and walked down the hallway towards the gym, with the sounds of our footsteps echoing around us.

「Oh, speaking of which…」

Maika said, as if suddenly remembering something.

「Did you hurt your arm or something?」

「I didn't. Why do you ask?」

「You've been touching it a lot lately.」

「…… Have I?」

「I mean, you're touching it right now.」

When Maika pointed it out, I suddenly became conscious of it.

I was holding my own arm like it was some sort of habit I developed, although the mark that Sendai-san made there had already disappeared.

「Oh, I guess you're right.」

I let go of my arm.

The hickey that Sendai-san made last week didn't last very long. It had already started to fade after two days. Before I knew it, the red mark had gradually faded until it matched the colour of my skin, disappearing as if it had melted into me.

In that time span, I had no recollection of touching my arm.

Even now, I probably never would've noticed without Maika pointing it out.

What was this?

I hated how I was acting like I wanted the mark to still be there.

「Heeey, Shiori. Don't forget to keep walking.」

Ami said as she pulled me by the arm.

That was enough to snap me out of my own head, and I managed to get my feet to start moving again.

「Was getting bullied by Tigerhashi that much of a shock?」

Maika laughed while giving me a pat on the back.

That wasn't the real reason, but I didn't bother correcting her either.

As I was being pulled along by Ami, I decided to ask Maika the question that had been on my mind for a while.

「Oh right, Maika. Is cram school hard?」

「Well, it is pretty hard, but I need to tough it out until the entrance exam is over. Oh, are you attending one right now, Shiori?」

「No, I'm not.」

「If you're going to enroll in one, you should come to mine. The teachers are pretty good at explaining things.」

Maika advertised the cram school she went to as if she owned the business.

I didn't really enjoy studying, but maybe going to the same cram school as Maika would feel better than just being alone in my own room all the time.

Or maybe if I went to the same prep school as Sendai-san——.

An idea that would never manifest briefly popped into my mind, but I immediately chased it away.

If I had to pick between attending a cram school or a prep school, I would definitely choose the former. But for the time being, I had no plans of going to either.

「I'll think about it.」

I responded to Maika's fervent invitation with a tentative

answer.

When I looked ahead, I saw a familiar figure at the end of the hallway.

「As always, they stand out quite a bit, don't they?」

Ami said without mentioning any names. However, when I saw Ibaraki-san and her group heading our way, I knew exactly who she was referring to.

Of course, Sendai-san was among the people in that group.

The girls walked straight down the middle of the hallway as if they ruled the school.

「They sure do.」

Maika said in a whisper as she moved aside for them to pass by.

The group in front of us buzzed with energetic, high-pitched voices as they chatted excitedly amongst themselves.

As Ibaraki-san's voice came closer to us, Sendai-san's eyes met with mine. But the exchange only lasted for a moment before we passed by each other.

Our school was quite big, but the third-year classrooms were all in the same building – things like this happened often. Sendai-san and I would never exchange words or wave if we saw each other in the hallways, though. That was one of the rules we'd set, there was nothing to be disappointed about.

Despite that, it felt like I'd been pricked by a strange sense of unease.

An odd feeling of discontentment plunged me into a melancholic mood. It didn't help that getting hit by Tigerhashi's wrath left me itching to summon Sendai-san.

However, it would only remain a temptation.

I'd already decided that I would try to put up with as much as

I could, after all.

「Oh, right. Did you guys hear about what happened?」

Maika suddenly said, turning around to make sure Ibaraki-san and the others were out of earshot before facing us.

「I heard Sendai-san was confessed to by a second-year on the boys' basketball team.」

Maika leaned in, whispering as if she were sharing classified information with us.

I had no idea where she even managed to hear that from.

「Oh? Who was it?」

Ami asked, sounding extremely curious about the details.

「Apparently, it was Yamada.」

I traced my memory upon hearing the name.

I hadn't heard anything about Sendai-san being confessed to by a boy from the basketball team. The name "Yamada" was never brought up before at all.

In fact, I didn't even know who this "Yamada" person was.

Sendai-san and I weren't close enough to engage in idle conversation, let alone discuss matters of love, so it wasn't surprising that I was unaware of what happened. However, when I heard Maika mention something unfamiliar to me, I couldn't help but feel unsettled.

「Isn't he pretty cool?」

Ami spoke in a more excited voice than usual.

「Hmm, I don't think he's that cool?」

「Really? Well, what do you think, Shiori?」

My feet came to a halt when the question was suddenly

passed over to me.

「…… Me? Well, I don't really know who he is. More importantly, you seem pretty up to date on this stuff.」

「Oh, actually, I heard it from someone who goes to my cram school.」

Maika replied casually before moving onto the next piece of gossip.

If I remembered correctly, Sendai-san had to go to prep school today.

Even if I asked for her today, she would only be able to come by tomorrow.

I'd feel bad if I called for her too often, though.

I thought to myself.

Despite that, I decided to send Sendai-san the usual message after gym class.

I Want to Hear Sendai-san's Voice (II)

Part 22

「Sorry about yesterday.」

As soon as she walked into the room Sendai-san started apologizing.

「This was something we agreed on, so it's fine.」

I was the one who suggested that if she couldn't visit after prep school, then she could come by the day after.

Even though I knew she had prep school yesterday, I sent her the usual message. As long as she abided by the rules and promised to come over today, I had no complaints.

「Here.」

I handed her the five-thousand-yen bill that I had prepared on my desk.

「Thanks.」

Sendai-san pulled out her wallet and slipped the bill in. Then, she walked up next to me and glanced at the calendar sitting on top of my desk.

「It's almost Golden Week, huh.」

「Even though spring break just ended.」

「Do you hate vacations or something, Miyagi? You were in a bad mood right before spring break, too.」

Sendai-san didn't mention why she thought I was in a bad mood back then. However, I was sure she was thinking about the day I poured soda on her.

「There's not much to do over the breaks, so I find them kind

of boring.」

I answered without touching upon the reason for my bad mood. Instead, I explained why I wasn't a fan of these long breaks.

「Vacations are nice, aren't they? Why don't you go somewhere fun?」

I did have plans over Golden Week, though.

Maika, Ami and I promised to hang out over the break, but I didn't feel the need to go out of my way to tell Sendai-san about that. I pushed my desktop calendar over and then poked her on the arm.

「Sendai-san, show me your arm.」

I didn't call it an order, but Sendai-san did as she was told and extended her arm out towards me. However, she was still clothed in her school uniform.

You know what I meant.

She should have known exactly what I was asking for, but she was pretending that she didn't. I reasserted myself.

「Roll up your sleeve.」

「Yes, yes.」

Sendai-san responded listlessly while unbuttoning the sleeve of her blouse. After that, she rolled it up along with the sleeve of her blazer.

I grabbed her arm, scanning the area between her wrist and her elbow.

「It disappeared a lot faster than I thought it would. What about yours, Miyagi?」

Sendai-san noted as I examined her arm.

Just like she said, I couldn't find the mark that I had left on her.

「It was gone almost immediately.」

「What about the bruise on your knee?」

「That's gone too.」

Unlike the hickey Sendai-san left on me, the regular bruise on my knee took longer to heal. Now, both my arm and knee were fully cleared up, to the point where I could hardly believe they were ever scarred.

Sendai-san's arm looked about the same as mine.

It was almost as if the events of last week never occurred.

I gently stroked Sendai-san's arm while still maintaining my grip on it.

It felt smooth to the touch, which I found rather pleasant.

—— If I pressed my lips against her arm right now…

As long as I called it an order, I could plant another hickey on her right now if I wanted to.

I gently squeezed the area where I left the last hickey.

Of course, there was nothing there anymore.

As I repeatedly pressed on the same spot with my fingers, Sendai-san took hold of my hand.

「Are you planning to leave another mark there or something?」

She asked, as if peering into my thoughts.

「No.」

After my curt response, she released my hand, and I started touching the inside of her elbow.

I wasn't sure if what I was feeling was bone or muscle or something else.

Either way, it felt hard to the touch.

I gently ran my hand down her arm, as if trying to get a better sense of what I was feeling.

I traced the blood vessels all the way to the wrist.

「It kind of tickles when you touch me like that.」

Sendai-san said, her fingertips twitching slightly. Nonetheless, she didn't pull her arm away, so I continued to run my fingers along the soft surface of her skin.

Doing this was making me forget the reason why I called Sendai-san here in the first place.

Hearing something unknown from Maika made my throat tighten, and I felt like it was hard to breathe. It didn't make me angry or anything, but it definitely wasn't a pleasant feeling either.

But how was I feeling now?

I raised my head.

The Sendai-san before me wore the same expression she did at school.

This was not the Sendai-san I wanted to see.

I dug my fingers into her smooth skin, my nails sinking deeper into her flesh as I applied more force.

「Your nails hurt.」

Sendai-san said, but she didn't even attempt to shake them off.

「Did you think that guy on the boys' basketball team was cool?」

I didn't particularly care about the answer, but with Maika's words still lingering in my mind I found myself unable to resist asking that mundane question.

「Why are you asking about the boys' basketball team?」

「Someone confessed.」

「To you?」

「……. You know what I'm talking about.」

I was aware that Sendai-san was this kind of person.

Sometimes, she would be a bit mean to me and only do or answer things when ordered to.

I applied a bit more pressure to my fingertips.

Sendai-san's face contorted slightly as she forcefully removed my hand from her arm.

「I turned him down.」

She didn't deny being confessed to; instead, she shared her answer with me.

「Why?」

「Why? Well, it's not like I had feelings for him or anything, and even if we started dating, I wouldn't have the time to see him either.」

「You "wouldn't have the time to see him", you say. Couldn't you just make time for him?」

「I mean, I still have prep school to attend. And then I have to come to your place.」

Sendai-san stroked the claw marks I'd left on her arm with a hassled look on her face.

「Let's say you did have the time. You stop going to prep school, and you don't have to come here either. Would you go out with him then?」

「No way, I already said I didn't have feelings for him. And you don't have to worry, Miyagi, I'd give priority to you.」

「I didn't ask for that.」

I gave Sendai-san, who was smiling teasingly in front of me, a gentle kick.

「Wow, someone's got bad manners.」

「Not as bad as yours, Sendai-san.」

She unfastened a button on her blouse and loosened her necktie.

She wasn't doing it at the moment, but I didn't want to hear that from someone who could lie down so carelessly on someone else's bed and look so messy that the inside of her skirt could be easily seen.

「You're jealous of that guy from the boys' basketball team, aren't you? Come on, you know it's true.」

Sendai-san's voice sounded as light as a feather as she spoke.

She unrolled her sleeve, covering her arm once again. Then, she took a seat on my bed.

「Don't be stupid.」

I could tell she was just joking, but I couldn't feel at ease unless I denied it.

I only felt a bit uncomfortable because Maika had told me something I didn't already know about.

This wasn't jealousy.

I sat on the floor with my back leaning against the bed.

Ever since the day I made Sendai-san lick my feet after spring break ended, I felt like something was wrong with me. The warmth of Sendai-san's tongue lingered within me, refusing to fade away.

As a result, I began treating Sendai-san like a friend. I played games with her and engaged in casual conversations, hoping that

would dispel this odd feeling inside me. That was my plan, but in the end, I couldn't bring myself to see her as a genuine friend.

That was how I felt even now.

I couldn't bring myself to talk to her like she was my friend.

In that case, what did I want from Sendai-san?

It was as if the more time we spent together, the less I knew.

I had forgotten the initial reason behind our arrangement.

Whenever Sendai-san was around, it was as if there was something invisible clinging onto my body, leaving my heart restless. I felt uneasy and sometimes, I couldn't even recognize myself.

I wished my jumble of emotions could vanish, like soda bubbles popping and fading away into thin air.

I took a deep breath as I stared out the window.

Before I knew it, the blue sky outside had turned dark.

I took out my contemporary Japanese textbook from my bag and handed it to Sendai-san.

「This is your order today. Get off the bed and read this to me.」

「You want me to read from a textbook?」

With a puzzled expression, Sendai-san said as she sat down beside me.

「Yes.」

I felt a bit tired.

I removed my blazer, socks, and necktie before lying down on my bed.

I Want to Hear Sendai-san's Voice (III)

Part 23

「So, why are you making me read you a textbook instead of a manga or a novel?」

Sendai-san said as she flipped through the pages of the contemporary Japanese textbook.

「It's like a lullaby. To help me fall asleep.」

I felt like if I stayed awake any longer, I would only end up saying things that I'd regret.

If Sendai-san had come by yesterday when I called for her, there might have been more to talk about. However, after spending a day alone with my thoughts, I couldn't find the right words to say anymore.

To begin with, there was no reason for me to summon her just because I'd learned that someone had confessed to Sendai-san.

「You know, if the teachers heard you calling textbooks "lullabies", they'd probably cry.」

She said, turning herself to face me.

Then, while I was lying down, Sendai-san lightly tapped me on the head with the textbook, just like the teachers would do.

「It's not my fault the classes are so boring.」

I gently hit her arm in return.

「It's not good to blame other people all the time, you know?」

She said in a teasing tone.

「Shut up. Now hurry up and read it to me.」

「Fine, I'll do it. But what am I supposed to do if you actually fall asleep?」

「Keep reading it as I sleep.」

「Huuh? No way, that's just going to make me sleepy too.」

Sendai-san said with an unmotivated voice as she flopped onto my bed.

Her hand touched my body.

More specifically, it was brushing against the side of my abdomen.

It felt a bit ticklish, so I propped myself up and tugged on Sendai-san's bangs.

「You're not allowed to fall asleep, Sendai-san. Get up.」

「Yes, yes.」

Just say "yes" once.

Even if I said that to her, Sendai-san probably wouldn't listen, so I didn't want to bother making it an order either.

Instead, I pushed her to start reading.

「I know already.」

She gave a short reply.

Then, a pleasant and soothing voice reached my ears.

It was a voice I heard quite frequently back when we were in the same class in our second year.

During class, she read from the textbooks with an enviable level of perfection. It made me want to be able to read just as proficiently as she did. Even today, her clear voice flawlessly recited the words from the textbook without mispronouncing anything.

As I closed my eyes, I felt at ease, as if I were cocooned in my

favourite blanket, shielded from the brightness outside, immersed in a world without light. In this warm, soothing darkness, my only illumination came from the sound of Sendai-san's voice.

It felt as if we were back in our old classroom – the same one we were in before the start of spring break.

Sendai-san's voice gracefully flowed out, seamlessly carrying the words from the textbook into my mind. With a tone gentler than a teacher, her voice lulled me into drowsiness, and soon my consciousness faded away.

Nothing as shallow and light as a nap, I had slipped down into the depths of sleep without even realising it.

I didn't see any dreams.

But by the time I woke up, it felt like several hours had gone by.

In the quiet of the room, my mind gradually cleared out the haze of sleep.

What time was it?

I started to sit up so I could see the time on the clock. Rather than the clock, though, I found myself looking at Sendai-san's sleeping face.

「Even after I told you not to fall asleep… 」

I had no idea when she dozed off, but she was slumbering peacefully beside me.

She wasn't close enough to have been considered sticking to me.

Sendai-san was sleeping by the edge of the bed, so there was a reasonable amount of distance between us.

She had removed her blazer but kept her socks on while sleeping. Her necktie was loosened, and as usual, she left two buttons unfastened on her blouse.

The light makeup on her face made her look well put-together.

You could even say she was rather pretty.

I softly caressed Sendai-san's face. If she were to wake up right now, she'd probably be upset at me for ruining her makeup. However, in her current state, she couldn't say anything. My fingertips traced her mouth, stopping just at the corner.

She had touched my fingers with these lips before.

They'd even been inside of her mouth as well.

The memory of her tongue against my fingers resurfaced – it was softer than this cheek.

The feeling of Sendai-san's wet tongue licking my blood came back to me.

Her tongue felt warm when it was pressed against my stinging wound. Of course, having Sendai-san lick the wound didn't get rid of the pain. The displeased look on her face as she obeyed my order and swallowed my blood brought me satisfaction, though.

But when she bit the wound, that feeling of satisfaction vanished instantly, and the pain intensified.

I ran my fingertips towards the middle of her lips.

I hadn't noticed it before, but they felt as soft as a marshmallow.

I softly pressed on her lips.

Sendai-san didn't react.

「Say something already.」

I wanted to hear her voice.

I wanted to hear the voice that always denied me.

Normally, she'd say things like, "Stop that," or, "Are you stupid?" to keep me in check. However, right now, the voice that

would usually be there to stop me was nowhere to be heard.

Because of that, my hand wouldn't stop.

My fingers moved from her lips to her chin and then ventured even further downward.

I traced my fingers along her neck, reaching down to her collarbone.

However, Sendai-san showed no signs of waking up.

If I went down just a little lower, I would reach the area where she told me not to leave a hickey.

After hesitating for a bit, I placed my fingers on her collarbone and followed it until I reached her shoulder.

My palm brushed against the bra strap hidden beneath her blouse, and I noticed the heat of her body. She seemed a bit warmer than usual, perhaps because she was asleep.

Even though it was about time for her to wake up, Sendai-san didn't show the slightest sign of stirring.

My gaze shifted towards the side of her neck.

That was one of the spots she explicitly forbade me from leaving a hickey.

I couldn't take my eyes off it.

I took my hand off her shoulder.

Leaning in towards the side of her neck, without unbuttoning anything on her blouse, I caught a whiff of the sweet fragrance of her shampoo.

This wasn't the first time I had smelled it before.

It had the same scent as my pillow on the nights after Sendai-san's visits.

As I inched my face closer to her neck, the fragrance grew

stronger, causing my heart to beat a little faster.

I brushed my lips against a spot right below her ear, and the sound of my own heartbeat grew louder in my head.

I pressed my lips firmly against her skin, attempting to drown out the sound of my pounding heartbeat. Just as I was about to bite down, the sensation of her soft flesh beneath my teeth snapped me back to my senses, and I quickly pulled away.

I wiped my lips.

As I hastily scrubbed my lips, as if trying to erase the memory of what had just happened, I felt a tug on my blouse.

「What were you doing?」

I turned to the source of the groggy voice next to me and found Sendai-san with her eyes slightly open.

「Nothing.」

I answered curtly, attempting to create some distance between us. However, there was a wall right behind me, preventing me from getting as far away as I wanted.

「Oh, I know. You were trying to do something erotic, weren't you?」

I don't think she noticed.

After all, she was asleep.

Since she had just woken up, she couldn't have known what happened.

—— At least, that should be the case.

「No, I wasn't.」

I responded firmly to Sendai-san's question. I could hear the smile in her tone of voice.

「Your face is red, you know?」

Sendai-san said as she extended her hand towards me.

My cheeks didn't feel hot.

My heart was beating a bit louder than usual, but I was certain that my face wasn't flushed.

Her hand, which felt warmer than usual, gently touched my cheek, causing me to reflexively back away. However, in doing so, I accidentally bumped into the wall behind me.

Thud.

「Ouch.」

A dull thump resounded in my room, and I instinctively held my head in pain.

I forgot there was a wall behind me.

However, thanks to the shock of hitting my head against the wall, my heart managed to regain its composure.

「You're lying about my face being red, aren't you?」

I complained to Sendai-san while stroking the area where I hit my head.

「Now, why would I do that?」

「More importantly, why did you fall asleep?」

I reprimanded Sendai-san by giving her leg a light kick for disobeying my order to keep reading even after I fell asleep.

「I felt sleepy just watching you sleep, and before I knew it, I dozed off too. What time is it right now?」

When I looked over at my clock, I noticed that quite a bit of time had gone by.

「It's almost eight o' clock.」

「I want to sleep some more.」

「Get up.」

After giving Sendai-san's leg another kick, she slowly got up, revealing my contemporary Japanese textbook lying underneath her.

「Sendai-san.」

「Hmm? What is it?」

「It's all bent.」

I grabbed the textbook from under Sendai-san and held it up to show her. The cover, which seemed to have been pressed against her back, had noticeable creases on it.

「Oh, I'm sorry! I fell asleep while I was reading it. I'm really sorry.」

Sendai-san apologized with a look of remorse on her face.

「It's okay, I don't really care. It's just a textbook.」

While having a clean and undamaged textbook was ideal, I didn't really mind even if it was bent.

I was only using it for one year anyway.

However, Sendai-san seemed like she really cared about it.

"I'm sorry." I heard her apologize once again.

「It's fine. I'm not going to need it for very long anyway.」

After carefully attempting to straighten out the cover, I put the textbook on my pillow.

I Want to Hear Sendai-san's Voice (IV)

Part 24

I wasn't really a fan of studying, and I didn't exactly feel motivated to prepare for the entrance exam either.

So even if my textbook was undamaged, I never really intended to use it that much anyway.

"I'll make it up to you next time," said the one responsible for the creases in my textbook.

「I told you, it's fine.」

I wasn't sure how she was planning to make up for it, but letting her do it sounded like a pain. Besides, I didn't really value textbooks that much.

More importantly, I felt very conscious of the distance between me and Sendai-san.

Although my room was quite spacious, the same couldn't be said about my bed – we were rather close.

If possible, I would've liked for there to be more space between us.

Since there was a wall behind me, I couldn't back away any further – all I could do was shift to the side and hug my own knees.

「But the cover's all bent. Isn't that going to bother you?」

Sendai-san asked, sounding more concerned about the state of my textbook than I was.

「No, not really.」

「Well, even if it doesn't bother you, it bothers me, so I'm still going to make it up to you.」

Sendai-san was incredibly stubborn when it came to arguments like these, and never backed off. She was a bit like me when it came to wanting to get her thoughts and opinions across.

Plus, Sendai-san had a lot more integrity than I originally thought: if she was promising to make it up to me, she was most likely going to see it through.

「I'm okay with whatever. Just don't go out of your way to do anything special.」

It felt pointless to spend any more time talking about the textbook's cover, so I tried to rush the conversation along.

「Well, I guess that's that then.」

I wasn't sure what she was planning, but Sendai-san ended the topic there. Then, she lightly kicked my leg.

「So, Miyagi, what do you want to do now?」

「Nothing in particular. If you want to have dinner here, I'll prepare something for us.」

「What should I do?」

"Hmm…" Sendai-san contemplated with an expression that suggested she wasn't thinking too deeply about it. Then, as if remembering something, she reached to fasten a button on her blouse.

I had seen her undo the second button countless times in this room before, yet this was the first time she had ever buttoned it up.

My body stiffened at the sight of her doing something out of the ordinary.

Sendai-san shouldn't have noticed anything.

After all, she was still asleep when I touched her neck.

So then, why did she button up her blouse up just now?

My heart felt tight, like it was being strangled.

I shouldn't have done anything to her.

After all, Sendai-san was not my friend, nor my lover.

I shouldn't have done anything to Sendai-san while she was asleep.

It would've been a different story had she been awake. At least then I could've ordered Sendai-san to stay still and it would've been fine.

Why did I even do that to her in the first place?

That was something I didn't even know the answer to myself.

「Miyagi, you're going to end up with wrinkles if you keep doing that.」

Sendai-san said as she pointed at my face.

「You've got a pretty scary expression on your face right now. I think you should go take a look in the mirror.」

「No, I'm good.」

If anything, I would have preferred to run away from this place altogether instead of looking in the mirror. But I couldn't just leave my room all of a sudden either.

「Are you not going to say those words today?」

Sendai-san asked, stretching her arms upward as if she were completely unaware of what had happened.

「What words?」

「You know, "lick it."」

「No.」

Today didn't seem like a good day for that.

I had a bad feeling about all of this.

「I see.」

Even though Sendai-san was the one who asked, her tone sounded indifferent. Then, she started touching my leg.

She stroked my bare toes and then ran her fingers up to my ankle.

The fingertips that gently brushed against my skin made me feel ticklish. When I tried to pull my leg away, she grabbed my ankle.

「Let go.」

Upon my firm instruction, Sendai-san complied. However, right after she released my ankle, her fingers slid upward, nudging my hands away from my knees. Without a trace of concern, she grasped the hem of my skirt and casually lifted it.

「Don't do anything weird.」

I grabbed her hand out of protest.

「I just wanted to see if the bruise on your knee was really gone or not.」

「My bruises disappear just fine on their own. You don't need to check anything.」

「Come on, show it to me anyway.」

Sendai-san said.

After brushing my hand away, she began touching my knee.

Even though she was the one who told me to show it to her, she wasn't actually looking at it.

She caressed my knee with her fingertips.

The way she was touching me felt strange.

A chill ran down my spine.

I didn't like this feeling at all.

「Didn't you say you wanted to look at it?」

I protested against Sendai-san, who kept gently stroking my knee.

「Would you rather I stop?」

Sendai-san asked, even though she sounded like she wouldn't listen to me no matter what I said, as her hand continued moving.

「Stop. Right now.」

I stated firmly.

However, Sendai-san did not stop.

Her fingers slid down from my knee all the way towards the instep of my foot.

She continued touching it, the same way she did whenever I ordered her to lick it.

She ran her finger along my foot.

It felt incredibly uncomfortable, like having ants crawl all over the surface of my skin. Despite that, I knew if I truly wanted to make Sendai-san stop, I could've done so by now. Instead, I hugged my knees tightly.

「Seriously, can we stop now?」

I pulled Sendai-san's hand off me.

「Is this supposed to be payback?」

Because I touched your neck while you were asleep.

I asked, wondering if she was just trying to get revenge because of what I had done.

「For what?」

Sendai-san sounded a little puzzled, but I couldn't be sure if she was just playing dumb or not. However, seeing how amused Sendai-san looked was sort of getting on my nerves.

「If that wasn't meant to be payback, then forget it. Now, give me your arm.」

I grabbed her arm without even waiting for a response.

「Is this supposed to be an order?」

「It is, so just do as I say.」

「Are you planning to leave another mark there?」

「Not exactly.」

I undid the button on the sleeve of her blouse and rolled it up.

I stared at the spot between her wrist and her elbow – the same area where I'd left a mark last time.

Then, I sank my teeth into her forearm, hard. It felt satisfying.

When it seemed like I was biting hard enough to break the skin, Sendai-san tried to shove my head away.

「Hey, that really hurts, you know.」

Feeling a firm push against the crown of my head, I raised my head.

「I can't believe this. How can you bite someone this hard? Isn't that just weird?」

Sendai-san said, rubbing her arm as she rolled her sleeve back down.

「We can consider this as you making it up for my bent textbook.」

「Don't just decide that on your own.」

「It'll be fine. The teeth marks will go away on their own soon.」

If only everything that I did could disappear just as quickly.

In any case, since it was an order, she didn't really have the right to complain. Besides, considering it was Sendai-san, it was highly unlikely that she was genuinely upset with me.

That was the sort of relationship we had with each other, so it was fine.

「It seriously hurt, though.」

Sendai-san said, sounding a bit resentful.

「It was also a punishment for all the weird things you've done before.」

「Compared to all the strange things you do, Miyagi, I think my actions pale in comparison.」

Sendai-san said in a slightly annoyed voice as she got off the bed.

Good, things felt just like usual again.

Seeing the grumpy look on her face, I was finally able to gain a sense of relief.

Chapter 7 Extra

Crocodile's Soliloquy

(Crocodile PoV)
Part 24-extra

Shiori-chan rarely invites friends over to her house.

That's why, it's always been just the two of us in this room. Shiori-chan's entire day—well, technically the hours she's not at school—belonged to me. We spent that much time together.

Yet one day, suddenly, someone by the name of Sendai-san—a classmate I had never seen or heard of before—appeared.

Once or twice a week.

She comes to this room about that often and does things with Shiori-chan that she doesn't do with any other friends.

It looks like excessive skinship, and I don't like it.

I never gave permission for Sendai-san to come to this room, nor did I allow such things to occur between her and Shiori-chan.

It's enough to make my guts, or rather, my tissues, boil with rage.

I'm nothing more than a crocodile tissue cover, yet I spend far, far more time with Shiori-chan than Sendai-san ever does. Though just a crocodile and not capable of being a friend, I've been watching over Shiori-chan. Now and forever onward, until my lifespan runs out, I've chosen to keep my watch over her.

Yet the audacity of someone else becoming close with her, ignoring me—the first member of the Shiori-chan fan club and a mere tissue cover—it's absolutely unforgivable. Sendai-san is too close with Shiori-chan.

—Hmm? Close?

No, I need to consider this carefully.
Are the two of them really that close?

Reading manga together and chatting could be signs of friendship, but even though they do things others don't, I can't say for sure that it's a sign of closeness.

In the first place, in human terms, what does it mean to make someone lick or to be licked?

Neither Shiori-chan, who is having her feet licked, nor Sendai-san, who is doing the licking, seems to be having fun, nor do they appear particularly happy. Yet, they don't seem to dislike it either, so perhaps they are indeed close—

No, no, no.
This cannot be good. It must not be good.

I mustn't admit that Shiori-chan and Sendai-san are close.

Shiori-chan said that Sendai-san isn't a friend. If they're not friends, then they can't be close. Of course, even if Shiori-chan were to say Sendai-san is a friend, I still wouldn't recognize them as close.

I understand that the day might come when I will have to leave Shiori-chan to someone else. But it absolutely can't be Sendai-san. For some reason—though I can't pinpoint why—I just can't stand the thought of it being her.

If someone must look after Shiori-chan, "Maika," another friend, might be a better choice. She's visited this room before, and she's kind, gentle, and considerate. I feel more at ease with the idea of leaving Shiori-chan to her.

The problem is that it's not Maika, but rather Sendai-san, who frequently visits this room.

Being a crocodile tissue cover, all I can do is watch over Shiori-chan while keeping a vigilant eye on Sendai-san.
So today, too, I'll keep a lookout to ensure that Sendai-san doesn't do anything strange to Shiori-chan.

If only I were human, then I could be more than just a guardian; I

could be her friend, her partner.

It's truly, truly regrettable.

Chapter 8

It's Because You Keep Touching Me, Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 25

It was amusing watching Miyagi look so confused.

If I said that, it'd probably make me sound like I had a terrible personality. But in my defense, Miyagi was acting incredibly guilty, like she had something she needed to confess.

「Wait, stay still.」

I said, stretching my arm towards Miyagi, who sat across the table from me. However, before my fingers managed to reach her,

「What is it?」

She asked warily.

「You've got a hair on you.」

When I gave her my reason for extending my arm out, Miyagi looked up from her book and asked, 「Where?」

「I'll get it for you.」

I put my hand on the table as I leaned forward over it.

I reached my hand towards Miyagi's chest and lightly brushed her neck with my fingers.

I had barely touched her.

The contact between us lasted for less than a second.

Yet, Miyagi recoiled more than necessary, as if I was about to

do something outrageous to her.

This all started a few days ago.

On the day I accidentally fell asleep in her room, I woke up feeling ticklish around my neck. However, being half-asleep, I wasn't really sure what was going on.

Well…

At first, I thought it was all just a dream, but then it turned out that it wasn't.

Seeing Miyagi's reactions more or less confirmed it for me.

On that day, Miyagi had placed her lips on my neck.

I pulled at her hair, which extended slightly past her shoulders.

「Ouch.」

「Oh, sorry. It was still on you.」

I said, although the strand of hair that I initially claimed was stuck on her wasn't something that could actually be plucked out.

「You're just doing this on purpose.」

「Well, it looked like a loose hair to me, so I thought I'd get it for you.」

I didn't deny that I was doing this on purpose.

After all, she wasn't wrong about that.

I usually left two buttons undone on my blouse, but this time, I kept the second one fastened.

Before I even stepped into her room today, I made sure to wear my necktie more neatly than usual. Yet, for some reason, it felt like she was intentionally avoiding looking at me.

Ever since that day, Miyagi had been acting strangely.

Even now, it felt like she was overreacting to the little prank I had just pulled on her.

「Hurry up and finish my homework.」

Miyagi said, sounding displeased.

The stray cat I thought I'd tamed had become wary of me once again.

That was the kind of vibe I was getting from Miyagi today.

「You don't have to rush me. I'm almost done.」

"Do my homework."

That was the order that she gave me about an hour ago. However, with us being in separate classes this year, doing her homework had become more tedious than before. When we were in the same class, our assignments were identical, so I only needed to answer the questions once and then copy what I'd written after. But now that we were in different classes, it meant I had twice the amount of work cut out for me.

Miyagi didn't have the highest grades. Although, despite struggling with some subjects, they weren't exactly terrible either.

But with the entrance exam approaching this year, it would've been better if she was more dedicated to her studies.

After all, doing well in school opened up more options, and having good study habits was more beneficial than not.

Plus, top-performing students had a wider range of universities to choose from, which in turn, meant they had more career choices in the future.

That being said, having good grades didn't necessarily guarantee success, so some of those efforts could easily end up going to waste as well.

「So, have you decided on a university yet?」

When I first asked Miyagi this question back in April, she had

answered with, “I’m not sure”.

「No, but if I do end up going to a university at all, then I’m fine with any school that will accept me.」

Miyagi replied with a similar, yet slightly different answer than before.

「You’re being way too casual about this.」

「I’m not interested in these things anyway. More importantly, you should get back to finishing my homework.」

「Yes, yes. I know.」

What a shame.

It wasn’t like I was about to ask her to attend the same prep school as me, nor was I about to force her into taking her studies more seriously, but Miyagi seemed a little too unmotivated.

Miyagi was always like this – so negligent and irresponsible.

On that day, she had taken the initiative to press her lips against my neck.

Rather, I guess it was more accurate to say she had simply done it without my permission.

I put my hand to my neck.

I had no idea why she had put her lips there. I thought she’d done it because her mind was still on the whole hickey thing, but if that were the case, then she would’ve left one on my neck.

So what did it mean if all she did was press her lips against it?

If the reason why she did it was to hammer in the fact that we weren’t friends, then I was fine with that. But it was starting to feel like her actions were rapidly turning our relationship into something other than friendship.

I was glad she was opening up to me more, but it’d be troublesome if things continued like this.

I was afraid of deepening my relationship with Miyagi.

I didn't want us to end up getting too close.

I wanted a friendship that was neither black nor white; something grey might be fine.

Otherwise, I feel like I'd end up having a hard time saying goodbye next year.

Plus, I didn't particularly dislike what Miyagi did to me either.

The fact I felt that way was wrong.

I couldn't explain why it was wrong, but it just was.

I picked up my eraser and threw it towards Miyagi.

The slightly curved eraser flew in the air and landed on the textbook beside her.

「You're not talking much today. Did something happen?」

As Miyagi raised her head in response to my question, I casually unfastened the second button of my blouse, causing her to quickly avert her gaze in an unnatural manner.

It didn't sit well with me that I was the only one whose emotions were in turmoil.

I wanted Miyagi to feel troubled as well.

「No.」

Miyagi responded with an indifferent tone and then immediately went back to reading her book.

「Do you want to gossip about love?」

「No.」

Just as I thought.

She didn't really seem like the type to be interested in that sort of thing.

I assumed she usually kept away from things like gossip, but I was wrong. She was aware that I'd been confessed to, so she probably had her own little network of connections.

「You don't have anyone you like, Miyagi?」

「I don't really like talking about this sort of stuff.」

「Well, in that case, why were you so curious about what happened with me?」

I mean, she seemed pretty eager to talk about love when she wanted to know why I rejected the confession I received.

I wasn't going to let her dodge the question by saying she forgot about it.

「……」

However, it didn't seem like she had any intention of answering the question at all. The only thing that could be heard was the rustling of pages as she flipped through her book.

「Miyagi.」

I urged her for an answer.

But she didn't flinch.

However, when I looked closely, I could see wrinkles forming between her brows.

I gently stroked my neck.

This is all because you tried to kiss me here.

You reap what you sow.

She needed to reflect upon her actions.

However, being in the same room with her wasn't fun when all

she was doing was ignoring me.

「Oh, I know. Can you lend me a book to read over Golden Week?」

Deciding that perhaps it was about time I forgave her, I changed the subject.

「I don't want to. 」

「I knew you were going to say that.」

Now she was starting to act like the Miyagi I knew.

If only she was like this all the time.

As long as things stayed unchanged, our relationship would remain peaceful.

I really didn't want to have to go through another emotional roller coaster.

So it felt reassuring seeing Miyagi return to her usual self.

It's Because You Keep Touching Me, Miyagi (II)

Part 26

It wasn't all that rare to see Miyagi so untalkative. I mean, she never really spoke that much to me in the first place.

When I thought about it that way, it just felt like Miyagi had gone back to normal.

Things weren't as fun like this, but I guess it couldn't be helped.

I had no control over her mood, after all.

At least, that was the reason I gave myself to help me accept it.

Then, before I knew it, Golden Week came and went in the blink of an eye.

Two days had gone by since the break ended and I hadn't seen Miyagi once.

We never even passed by each other in the hallway.

Maybe that was because we were in different classes, though.

Well, it wasn't like I felt lonely or anything.

I had no shortage of people to talk to, and my circle of friends also grew.

There was nothing to complain about. My school life was coming along nicely and I was having fun. I'd heard some of my new classmates call me a people pleaser behind my back a few times, but it wasn't enough for me to care about.

「Hey, I'm gonna pop by the class next door for a sec.」

In the midst of the bustling classroom during recess, Umina,

who was seated diagonally across from me, suddenly spoke up.

「Oh. What's up?」

「I forgot my textbook.」

"Or maybe I should just skip class…" When Umina mumbled to herself, Mariko immediately interjected with,

「Don't do it. The teachers said you had to write an apology letter the next time you skipped, didn't they?」

「Hmm… I don't really care about writing one, but whatever. Guess I'll go borrow a textbook from someone next door.」

Umina said, sounding unmotivated, as she left the classroom.

She wasn't exactly what you'd call an honor student. Just like last year, she was always ready to skip class. Even after being summoned to the school faculty room repeatedly, it seemed that nothing could deter her.

During our second year, Mariko used to tag along with Umina whenever the latter decided to skip class. However, now that we were in our third year and our futures were at stake, it seemed that Mariko had a change of heart.

Being in a friend group was kind of troublesome when it came to times like this.

When one person got caught doing something wrong, the whole group was seen as in the wrong too.

That was probably how we were perceived too.

But it was true that Mariko had an extensive history of skipping class. However, now that she wanted some written recommendations from our teachers, she began to pay more attention to her grades, and was determined to stop Umina from skipping classes as much as possible.

But for her to start being concerned about her grades now?

I felt like it was a little too late in the game for that.

Well, it was definitely a lot better than doing nothing, though.

I pulled my notebook and textbook out of my desk.

I didn't find classes particularly fun, but I had no intentions of skipping them either. I needed to put in the effort to maintain my own image of being an honor student, unlike my friends.

「Oh, can I borrow your notebook later? I wanna copy your notes.」

Mariko asked. As I nodded my head to agree to her request, I heard a voice coming from behind us.

「I managed to borrow one.」

Umina said as she sat back down with a textbook in one of her hands.

「Wait, that–」

I reflexively let out my voice.

Our next class was contemporary Japanese, so it wasn't strange seeing her with that textbook in her hands.

However, there were visible creases on the cover of it.

「What?」

Umina asked, sounding puzzled as she stared at the textbook.

I clenched my fists.

I blurted those words out as if the object in Umina's hands was something special.

I shouldn't have said anything. But if I tried to play it off as nothing, that'd probably just seem even more unnatural and would only end up piquing Umina's interest.

「That's not Ruka's textbook, right? Who did you borrow it from?」

Ruka was a friend who Umina usually borrowed her textbooks from. However, the current textbook Umina had in her hands clearly did not belong to Ruka or any of her other friends.

The textbook that Umina was holding belonged to none other than Miyagi.

I would know. I was the one who made those creases on that cover.

「Huh? How'd you know that?」

「Just a hunch.」

I made sure to keep the reason a secret.

Umina had no idea that Miyagi and I were close enough that I could recognize her textbook just by its cover, and there was no need to tell her either.

「I wanted to ask Ruka for hers, but she wasn't there, so I just borrowed it from some girl that was in the same class as us last year. What was her name again? It was some plain looking girl with longish hair.」

"You know, that one girl…" Umina asked as she searched her memory for the girl's name. But I was pretty sure Umina wasn't going to find anything.

And because of that, I decided to answer the question for her.

「…… Miyagi?」

「Ohh, right, right. Her name was Miyagi. You've got a good memory, don't you, Hazuki? You never forget people's names.」

Umina said with admiration as she stared at the textbook. Then, she suddenly laughed.

「Wow, Miyagi seems so plain, but look, her textbook's all beat up. That's hilarious.」

Umina's laughter was soon drowned out by the sound of the

school bell. As Mariko rushed to her seat, the teacher walked into the classroom.

「Settle down. Class is about to begin.」

The teacher said as he gave his desk a knock.

As the lecture started, the noisy classroom gradually quieted down.

Words that could hardly be called legible were written on the blackboard. The letters that clearly looked like they did not belong on a chalkboard resembled earthworms wriggling across the ground, making the notes difficult to decipher.

I glanced at the seat diagonally across from me.

Umina's back was all I could see; the textbook she was using was barely visible.

I shifted my gaze back towards the blackboard and copied the words into my notebook.

It wasn't like I was trying to claim ownership of the bent textbook or anything, but the thought of Umina using it right now weighed heavily on the arm I was taking notes with.

The sound of our teacher's hoarse voice only made me feel more agitated.

Snap.

The lead of my mechanical pencil made a small noise as it broke off.

You couldn't even bother to remember Miyagi's name.

I closed my eyes.

I shouldn't be letting myself stress so much over a textbook. Having complicated, inexplicable feelings like these would only to lead to trouble.

So, I closed my eyes.

Let's just stop worrying about the textbook. It doesn't even matter. It's not important.

I opened my eyes again and stared at the blackboard.

Just listen to what the teacher is saying and keep taking notes.

As I repeated those words over and over again to myself in my head to dispel the unnecessary thoughts I kept having, class quickly came to an end.

Time continued to pass by in the blink of an eye.

Then, before I knew it, the school day was almost over.

Of course, out of all the days Miyagi could have decided not to call for me, it just had to be today.

What's with that?

You should be contacting me on days like this.

I complained in my mind.

"I'm coming over." That was what I wanted to say to her.

I'd never sent her a message like that before, but it wasn't as if we made it a rule that I couldn't reach out to her first.

I was used to her being the first to contact me so I grew to expect it, but I'm sure I was allowed to do it too.

As soon as the last bell of the day rang, I immediately pulled out my phone.

I stared at the screen.

「You waiting for a text? From who, your boyfriend?」

I looked up when I heard Umina's voice calling out to me.

「I don't have time for a boyfriend.」

「Whaat? If you ever want one, I can always hook you up, you know?」

「I'm good for now. At least, not until the entrance exams are over.」

「I see. Are you going to cram school today?」

No matter how many times I corrected Umina before in the past, she continued to refer to my prep school as cram school. Not bothering to correct her again, I answered with 「Nope.」

「In that case…」

"I got a lotta places I wanna go to today."

Umina said, expressing her desires, and Mariko agreed to go with her.

I put my phone back in my bag.

In the end, the messages should come from Miyagi.

It'd be all wrong if they came from me.

By the time homeroom ended, we'd already decided where to go after school, and we left the classroom.

It's Because You Keep Touching Me, Miyagi (III)

Part 27

She's definitely going to contact me right after the break ends.

At least, that was what I thought Miyagi would do. However, she hadn't been in touch for a while, and she only ended up sending me a message three days after she lent Umina her textbook.

Well, not that it bothered me in the slightest.

Miyagi was the one paying me, so she was free to decide whenever we'd hang out.

I decided to drop by the convenience store on my way to Miyagi's house and bought some potato chips and chocolate.

Miyagi rarely ever served snacks at her place. I didn't feel like talking much today, so I wanted to be able to pass the time comfortably by eating something.

With a plastic shopping bag in hand, I headed for Miyagi's house.

It was annoying how clear the skies were today. It was as if everything was coated in a layer of blue paint, devoid of any blemishes.

However, a shadow seemed to hang over my heart, casting a darkness even in the sunlight. While Miyagi's place usually felt more comfortable than being at home, every step toward her house now felt burdensome.

Why was I forced to feel this way?

The plastic bag in my hands swayed back and forth as I walked.

As if trying to chase Miyagi out of my thoughts, I started

running.

Five minutes.

That was about how long it took to reach Miyagi's apartment while sprinting at full speed. I called her on the intercom to let her know of my arrival, and she quickly let me in. I got on the elevator and rode up to her floor. Then, I rang the doorbell and she soon welcomed me in.

「Here.」

She handed me a five-thousand yen bill the moment I took off my shoes.

Even though we hadn't seen each other in a while, Miyagi was as curt as always.

「Thanks.」

After slipping the bill into my wallet, I went to Miyagi's room.

As I set the plastic shopping bag I brought with me down, Miyagi got up and left the room.

I walked over to her bookshelf and could immediately tell from a glance that the number of books had increased.

I grabbed a manga I didn't recognize and took a seat on the bed.

As I took my time reading the book, Miyagi came back with cups of barley tea and soda in her hands.

「You bought new books?」

「I had some free time over the break.」

Instead of answering with a "yes" or a "no", Miyagi told me the reason behind the new books.

Her room hadn't really changed at all since the start of the break.

Much like how her attitude remained as unfriendly as ever.

I closed the book in my hands and pointed over to the plastic bag I had brought with me.

「I went and bought some stuff earlier. Feel free to open it if you want.」

「Why don't you do it instead?」

Miyagi said without even sparing so much of a glance at the bag I was referring to as she walked over to her bookshelf.

And just like always, Miyagi would either reply with something snarky or generally sound displeased. Usually, I wouldn't mind it that much, but I felt annoyed at Miyagi today.

「Shiori.」

I decided to try calling Miyagi by her given name.

「…… Huh?」

She paused for a moment, but as soon as she turned her head, there was a blatant look of disgust written all over her face. Seeing that, I said her name one more time.

「Can I call you "Shiori"?」

As far as I was aware, all of Miyagi's friends called her by her first name.

So there shouldn't be any problem with me doing it too.

It wasn't like we were friends or anything, but we did a lot of things that friends usually wouldn't do with each other. Considering we shared a secret that we couldn't tell anyone else about, I didn't see an issue with us getting a bit closer.

However, Miyagi didn't seem to feel the same way.

「No.」

Miyagi said coldly as she sat on the opposite side of me with a

book in her hands.

「You're so stingy.」

I got off the bed and took a seat on the floor.

I pulled the chips and chocolate out of the white shopping bag and opened the chips. As if celebrating a pity party by myself, I started munching on them alone.

One piece, then a second, then a third.

I chewed on the chips and brought them to my stomach.

Before the break, Miyagi – who had always strongly denied our friendship – suddenly started treating me like a friend.

She asked me about the boy who confessed to me and got upset over it.

That had to have been jealousy.

And yet, she still wouldn't let me call her by her given name.

That pretty seemed unreasonable to me.

I glanced over at Miyagi.

She seemed to be concentrated on reading her manga, so she didn't look up to meet my gaze.

She didn't seem the least bit interested in eating the chips either.

「Hey, Miyagi. Do you want me to feed you?」

I said as I grabbed a chip from the bag.

「No. I don't need it.」

「You don't have to hold back.」

I brought the chip towards Miyagi's mouth. However, instead of eating the one I was holding in my hand, she reached over to the

bag and grabbed a different one for herself.

「I can feed myself just fine.」

Miyagi said as she devoured the chip in one bite.

「What about this one?」

I asked, still holding the chip that has now seemingly lost its purpose.

「I don't want it.」

Miyagi said bluntly as she pulled another chip from the bag and popped it in her mouth.

Pitying the stray chip in my hand, I decided to put it away in my stomach. Then, I reached over and grabbed Miyagi by the wrist.

「What do you want?」

Miyagi asked with a wary tone in her voice, but I ignored it.

Usually, she'd order me to lick her fingers, but this time, I decided to do it out of my own volition.

As I pressed my tongue against her fingers, the taste of salt spread in my mouth.

「Sendai-san, stop that.」

Miyagi said as she tugged on my bangs.

However, I had no intention of listening to Miyagi.

I wrapped my tongue around her finger and gently bit down on it.

I applied more force to my bite until I could feel the bone of her finger underneath my teeth. As soon as I did so, she immediately pulled her finger out of my mouth.

「I thought I told you to stop.」

Miyagi spoke harshly, like she was throwing the words at me, as she furrowed her brows.

Seeing her look so obviously discontent with me made my heart race.

『That's the kind of face that I want to see.』

Miyagi had once said that to me after she'd put me in an unsavory mood.

Back then, Miyagi looked unusually happy at seeing my disgusted face.

At the time, I felt like I couldn't tell what was going through her head, but I understood the appeal now.

Seeing Miyagi direct those emotions towards me sent chills down my spine.

「You taste kind of salty, Miyagi.」

I said with a grin on my face, while Miyagi frowned at me in return.

「Isn't that just because of the chips?」

「Well, I guess so.」

「What is with you today? Stop doing these strange things.」

「Hey, it's only going to keep getting weirder unless you give me an order.」

Being around Miyagi brought out a side of me that I hardly recognized.

And to think, not too long ago, I never would've even considered licking Miyagi's fingers without being ordered to.

I hadn't planned to get so deeply involved with her, but it seemed I was doing a terrible job at handling that.

「I haven't come up with anything for you to do yet.」

Miyagi muttered.

「Shall I do your homework for you?」

「You're too noisy, Sendai. I'll think of something myself, so just be quiet.」

It seemed she wasn't in the mood to have me do her homework today.

Miyagi put her manga down on the table and took a sip of her soda.

She liked giving orders, but hated being told what to do.

After thinking for a moment, Miyagi started rummaging through her school bag with a look on her face that suggested she knew exactly what she was looking for.

Since I had nothing else to do, I decided to eat more chips.

However, when I licked the salt off my fingertips, I became keenly aware of how it tasted just like Miyagi earlier.

「Sendai-san.」

It seemed that she'd calmed down a bit, as the voice I heard calling out to me sounded like the usual Miyagi.

「This is your order for today. Hide this.」

「An eraser?」

I said, staring at the object in front of me.

「Yes.」

「When you say "hide it", does that mean I can hide it anywhere I want?」

「No. Hide it somewhere in your uniform, then I'm going to look for it after.」

「…… You're always so quick to think up the weirdest ideas, Miyagi.」

I could see this game being fun if I was allowed to hide the eraser anywhere in the room, but being told that I could only hide it somewhere in my uniform changed the meaning of the whole game.

「It's not weird.」

「No way, you're definitely thinking of doing something weird.」

「In that case, what "weird" thing do you think I'm planning to do, Sendai-san?」

「I'm sure you're just trying to touch me in strange places.」

「What's "strange" is that you could even come up with such an idea in the first place. You really are a pervert, Sendai-san.」

「I'm pretty sure if anything, you're the pervert here, Miyagi.」

「I don't mind being a pervert. Now, hurry up and hide it.」

Since I accepted a five-thousand bill from her earlier, I had no right to refuse her order.

Even if she did start touching me in strange places, at least she'd be doing it over my uniform, so it wasn't a big deal.

I picked up the eraser that was sitting on the table.

「Fine. Face the other way.」

I said. Then, Miyagi obediently turned her back to me.

It's Because You Keep Touching Me, Miyagi (IV)

Part 28

I examined my own uniform, which consisted of a blazer, skirt and a blouse.

No matter how you looked at it, the only place where I could hide an eraser was inside a pocket. Technically, my socks would've worked as well, but then it'd stand out like a sore thumb. It'd be impossible to hide it somewhere on my necktie, and I didn't have any tape to stick it to the back of my collar either.

My hiding spots were extremely limited.

Miyagi was undoubtedly aware that the winner had already been decided even before the game started. Most likely, her goal was to use the game as an excuse to touch me in various places just to get a kick out of seeing my reactions.

To begin with, something like this could hardly even be called a game. There was no penalty game for the loser either.

Whatever. I'm just going to hide it someplace simple so Miyagi can't get any satisfaction from this.

I slipped the eraser into the right pocket of my blazer.

The pocket was the most obvious hiding place, and I wanted her to be able to find it right away.

「Okay, I hid it. You can turn around now.」

I said, prompting Miyagi to turn and face me.

There was a small bump in my pocket, so there was no way she wouldn't be able to find it. I even caught Miyagi stealing a quick glance at my pocket. However, for some reason, she decided to stay quiet about it and instead came closer. She started examining my

body like an investigator on a TV show, beginning with my blazer.

Right…

Of course it was going to turn out like this.

Miyagi patted my shoulders down as if she was following a procedure.

I didn't think it was particularly unpleasant or anything, but I also wasn't open-minded enough to say that I found this amusing. But since she was only touching me over my blazer, I wasn't that bothered by it.

Miyagi's hands unnaturally avoided checking my pockets as she shifted her focus towards my skirt.

She briefly stroked my hipbones and gently tapped my thighs in search of the eraser. However, because it was impossible to hide an eraser in those places, she quickly moved on and examined my skirt's pockets.

After giving my pockets a light pat, Miyagi moved behind me.

Just as I was about to ask what she was doing, she slipped her hand into my pocket.

Was it because it was more difficult doing it from the front?

I see.

Right as I convinced myself what Miyagi doing was normal, her hands started moving around all of a sudden, causing me to immediately grab her wrist out of reflex.

「Stop moving your hands around like that.」

The fabric inside of my pocket was a lot thinner compared to the rest of the skirt.

Despite being well aware that the eraser wasn't there, the way she moved her hands around made it feel as if she was touching my leg directly, which I found rather uncomfortable.

「I won't know if it's there or not unless I check thoroughly, right?」

「Don't you think most people can normally tell the second they put their hand in?」

「No.」

Miyagi answered with something completely unreasonable as I felt her fingers begin to move again. This time however, I forcefully pulled her hand out of my pocket.

I knew something like this was going to happen.

This was probably her idea of payback, likely because I'd called her by her first name and licked her fingers without her permission. I wasn't sure what else she had in store for me, but I didn't find any of this particularly amusing.

「Can we stop with this?」

「No.」

Miyagi said as she got up in front of me and started unbuttoning my blazer.

I knew she wasn't going to stop, and I expected her to take my blazer off as well. Even so, my body couldn't help but stiffen.

Miyagi opened my blazer up and stared at my blouse, despite knowing the eraser obviously wouldn't be in a place like that. She scanned up and down with her eyes. Then, with her right hand, she began touching the side of my stomach.

I gripped Miyagi's arm as she searched me.

It felt ticklish.

I could withstand her patting me down when I was still wearing my blazer, but the fabric on my blouse was a lot thinner. Each movement of her hand sent shivers down my spine, making it an uncomfortable place to be touched. However, instead of stopping Miyagi, I found myself simply holding onto her arm.

She pinched my side as if she were tearing a piece of bread, causing me to flinch. Then, before I knew it, her left hand had started caressing the area just above my hipbone.

「So your waist is your weak spot, huh?」

Miyagi said, sounding clearly amused.

「It's not a weak spot. I'm just ticklish there.」

「Isn't that exactly what a weak spot is?」

Miyagi slowly stroked my waist with her fingers.

The sensation of my blouse lightly rubbing against my skin made me shiver.

Her fingertips started making their way towards my back, her nails tracing a path on my blouse as if she were writing letters on it.

I grabbed Miyagi by the arm.

The way she was touching me felt different from before.

She was wearing the same bored expression on her face, but her touch felt strangely inappropriate and completely unlike how friends typically behaved. It was way different from how Umina and the others casually touched each other.

Her touch up until now felt cold and emotionless. That was something I was fine with.

It let me believe we were only playing a silly game.

But what we were doing now just wasn't right.

「Stop, that seriously tickles.」

I applied more pressure to the hand I was grabbing her arm with.

「Fine. I'll look somewhere else if you let go.」

「Okay, but if you try something like that again, I'll actually

slap you.」

「Isn't violence supposed to be against the rules?」

Miyagi mumbled under her breath.

Of course, I knew that much, and I really didn't want to hit her either.

「Continue your search somewhere else, got it?」

I gave her another stern warning.

When I let go of Miyagi's arm, she did exactly as she was told.

Instead, Miyagi used her other hand to slip into my blouse's breast pocket.

I was instantly reminded of what she had done inside the pocket of my skirt.

「Come on, you already know it's not there.」

I kicked Miyagi's leg out of protest.

I wasn't comfortable with her touching me so much through the thin fabric of my blouse.

「Sendai-san, that's against the rules. Also, I won't know unless I check, right?」

「You're so annoying…」

Hearing the delight in Miyagi's voice was really starting to get on my nerves.

「Look, it's fine. Now that I've made sure that it's not here, I can search somewhere else.」

I wasn't exactly sure what was "fine" about all of this, but at the very least, she took her hand out of my pocket.

「Just finish this already. You already know where it is, don't you? It was so obvious from the start.」

I wanted the game to end already.

She knew where the eraser was, so there was no point in dragging this out.

「Bear with me for a little longer.」

「Is there anywhere you haven't checked by now?」

「Take off your necktie.」

「… Huh?」

I said out of reflex as Miyagi began taking off my necktie. Then, without any hesitation, she placed her hand on the side of my neck.

Her palm clung to my skin as if there was no gap between them.

Miyagi's hand felt surprisingly warm, though I couldn't be entirely sure if that was her heat or mine. The boundary between us seemed to be blurring into something more indistinct, but that was likely because she had placed her lips on the same area not too long ago.

「Shiori.」

I called Miyagi by the name she hadn't given me permission to use and then gently placed my hand on top of hers.

「Don't call me that.」

Miyagi peeled away the hand that was glued to my neck as she furrowed her brows and glared at me.

Somehow, seeing her with that bitter look on her face made all my heavy feelings from earlier a bit lighter.

I wanted Miyagi to look at least a little troubled.

「Can I say it one more time?」

I asked softly, but my question seemed to cause the wrinkles

between Miyagi's eyebrows to deepen.

I wasn't sure why, but for some reason, she found it incredibly unpleasant whenever I called her by her first name.

「Shut up.」

Miyagi sounded disgruntled as she moved her hand towards a button on my blouse.

「What are you planning to do?」

She didn't respond.

Instead, she silently started unbuttoning my blouse.

I kept the top two buttons of my blouse undone today, so the one she ended up unfastening was the third. Right as she was about to go for the fourth, I pushed her away by the shoulders.

「Hey!」

「What?」

「Keep your hands off. There's no reason for you take my blouse off, right?」

I tore Miyagi's hand away from my blouse and buttoned myself back up.

She probably didn't intend to take it off anyway.

Around halfway through our game, it felt like this whole thing turned into a test of endurance. At this point, we were just playing a game of chicken. We both knew that there were certain lines we couldn't cross, after all.

「I thought there was a chance you hid the eraser there.」

「That's impossible. Plus, doing something like this is against the rules.」

「Well, we agreed that having sex was against the rules, but we never said anything about taking off your clothes, right?」

「Fine, in that case, let's make it a rule right now.」

「Look, it was just a joke. I never actually intended to take it off.」

I know.

I understood all of this was supposed to be a joke.

Whatever she did just now was all part of the game, and she was simply pushing my limits until I forced her to stop.

But still, this sort of joke wasn't very funny.

「You already know where I hid it, don't you?」

I asked as I stepped on Miyagi's foot.

She placed her hand over the right pocket of my blazer.

「Here?」

「Wow, you got it. Okay, the game's over now.」

I emphasized the last part before Miyagi could even get the chance to suggest playing a second round.

「You're so lewd, Miyagi.」

I lobbed a complaint at her as I fixed up my necktie and took a seat on her bed.

「Alright, any more orders?」

「No.」

Miyagi said with a bored tone in her voice as she brought a cup of soda to her mouth.

She placed her empty glass back on the table as she leaned against the bed like a backrest.

I couldn't see her face from here.

I wasn’t sure what was going through her mind right now either.

Miyagi’s uniform brushed against my leg.

Feeling a bit tickled by her blazer, I started tapping her on the shoulder with my foot.

Chapter 9

I Don't Care If Sendai-san Noticed (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 29

Even before I opened the refrigerator, I already knew I'd find nothing there.

Standing in the kitchen, I let out a sigh.

If Sendai-san hadn't bought the ingredients last time, there wouldn't have been anything for her to make karaage with.

Though even if I did have the ingredients at home, I wouldn't know how to cook it anyway.

「What should I eat?」

I muttered to myself quietly, as if I even had anything to choose from. There was only one thing I had at home that was simple to make.

I closed the refrigerator and pulled two cup noodles from the kitchen shelf. I peeled the wrapping film off and opened the lid. Just as I was about to do the same for the second cup, I quickly realized there was no need to do so.

「Ugh…」

Earlier, I had come up with the eraser searching game on a whim. However, things felt a bit awkward between us afterward, so I ended up sending Sendai-san straight home. As we usually had dinner together on days she visited, my body moved on its own and I instinctively prepared enough for two people.

I put the extra portion back on the shelf before returning to my cup noodles. I poured hot water from the kettle into the cup and set a timer on my phone for three minutes.

In moments like these, I couldn't help but notice how needlessly spacious the kitchen and living room were. It felt incredibly uncomfortable being by myself.

Apart from my bedroom, it felt as though I was living in someone else's home.

I turned around and glanced at the television and coffee table that no one ever used.

How long has it been since I last shared a meal with my dad?

I tried to remember the last time, but I couldn't recall it.

I let out a sigh, feeling frustrated that I had no recent memory of it. Suddenly, a high-pitched noise from my phone startled me.

「That surprised me…」

Things like that were bad for the heart.

Much like the things that Sendai-san would do.

My heart nearly stopped beating when she decided to call me "Shiori" earlier.

Only Maika and Ami ever used my given name. Until today, Sendai-san had never done so.

Because of that, when she called me by my name out of nowhere earlier, I felt as if I couldn't catch my breath.

It wasn't my fault I couldn't come up with a response right away.

I peeled the rest of the lid off on my cup ramen and brought the noodles to my mouth.

「This doesn't taste that great…」

Cup noodles weren't particularly delicious to begin with, but it would've tasted a lot better if someone else was here with me.

Even Sendai-san would've sufficed.

But Sendai-san was acting a bit weirder than usual today, so I decided to have dinner by myself.

「What was up with her today?」

Sendai-san always acted overfamiliar with me, but even more so today. There was something wrong with her sense of distance. She licked my fingers without being ordered to and then suddenly decided to call me "Shiori" out of nowhere.

She kept touching me, almost as if she was implying she wanted us to become even closer, so I felt the desire to touch her too.

As a result, I spontaneously came up with the eraser searching game.

Something wasn't right.

Sendai-san was acting too strange.

If she had behaved normally, I wouldn't be eating dinner by myself right now.

Something must've happened.

If I had to guess ——

I went and poured myself a glass of barley tea and placed the cup on the table.

I ran my fingertips along my neck; the temperature of my hand that had just been cooled by the barley tea felt unusually cold.

Most likely, Sendai-san knew what I did to her.

That day, when she bent my textbook, I'd touched her neck with my lips.

Ever since then, it seemed as if her actions were aimed at teasing me.

She used to be quite obedient, but lately, she'd been on a rebellious streak and would always do things I never asked her to do. I didn't want her to call me by my first name, and I disliked it whenever she acted without being ordered to.

There were a few rules we came up with together.

As long as my commands adhered to the rules, I could make Sendai-san do whatever I wanted, and she had to listen. If I wanted to touch her, I could tell her to let me. If I wanted her to stop being rebellious, I could issue that order as well. And if I really felt like it, I could even make her forget things, so it didn't matter if she knew about what I did to her or not.

But today, I couldn't escape the strong feeling of awkwardness, as if we had done something we shouldn't have.

I took another bite of the ramen that was now getting cold and followed it up with a sip of barley tea.

Unsurprisingly, it didn't taste that good.

But since I wasn't eating it for the taste, I forced the rest of the noodles down before getting up.

After cleaning up all the trash, I turned the lights off.

The living room was so dark that I could barely make out the shape of my hand.

I raised the hand that Sendai-san had licked earlier toward the now darkened light.

I couldn't really see anything, so I brought my fingertips to my lips instead.

Of course, it didn't taste like anything.

I decided to go back to my room.

「Oh right, my eraser.」

I suddenly remembered something when I caught a glimpse of my open schoolbag.

Sendai-san never gave my eraser back to me.

「You should really remember these things…」

I can't do my homework like this.

I wasn't keen on doing my homework, but I figured I should at least get it done. However, thanks to Sendai-san, I couldn't do it anymore. If things were going to turn out like this, I should've just made her do my homework for me.

But Sendai-san had already gone home, so complaining wouldn't bring my eraser back, and there was no magic I could use to make my homework finish by itself.

Maybe Maika will let me copy her homework.

Choosing to entrust my homework to Maika tomorrow, I decided to turn in early.

When morning came around, I ended up stopping by a convenience store to pick up an eraser before heading to school.

Although Sendai-san was just in the class next door, she never bothered to come by and return my eraser to me. She didn't say anything even when we passed by each other in the hallway.

However, we did agree that we wouldn't speak to each other at school, so there was really nothing to feel disappointed about.

If I was really curious about what happened to my eraser, I could just ask her the next time she visited. Moreover, I had a new eraser now. They were cheap and easily replaceable, so it wasn't a big deal.

Over the next several days, nothing significant enough happened for me to want to summon Sendai-san. I had gotten better at enduring minor annoyances, so I didn't really feel the need to call for her either. However, by the time a full week had gone by, I couldn't resist reaching out to her.

After all, it'd probably seem suspicious if I just suddenly stopped calling for her.

So, for the first time ever, I decided to send her a message without really having a reason to.

『Come over to my house today.』

Her reply came immediately.

Since she had prep school today, she promised she would stop by tomorrow.

I Don't Care If Sendai-san Noticed (II)

Part 30

It hadn't been that long since we last saw each other.

However, there was something different about Sendai-san today, probably because we had just changed our school uniforms. Maybe that was why, even within the comfort of my own room, I felt restless.

「Hey, Miyagi. Did something happen?」

Sendai-san said while unbuttoning her blouse.

「Why are you asking?」

「Hmm, well, because it took you this long to call for me.」

「I was just busy.」

「Oh? I see…」

Sendai-san didn't ask what I was busy with.

Of course, even if she did ask, I wasn't planning on answering her. Truthfully, I wasn't busy with anything, so I wouldn't have been able to anyway.

After I brought in some cups of soda and barley tea to my room, I handed Sendai-san a five-thousand-yen bill.

「Thanks.」

She said as she accepted the bill and took a seat on my bed.

It was a bit reassuring seeing her take the money from me just like always.

Apart from her uniform transitioning from a blazer to a sweater vest, Sendai-san herself remained unchanged. As usual, she left the

top two buttons of her blouse undone and her necktie slightly loosened.

「Are you not going to take that off?」

I asked while pointing at Sendai-san's vest, who was sitting across the table from me.

「Wow, Miyagi. You sure are eager to see other people undress.」

She said with a teasing tone in her voice.

「That's not what I meant. I was only asking because you'd always take off your blazer.」

「I know, I know. So, what are we doing today?」

「You're quick to change the subject, aren't you, Sendai-san?」

Today, I summoned Sendai-san without any specific reason.

So I hadn't come up with an order to give her yet.

「Well, for now, I guess I'll just start on my homework.」

It wasn't like I wanted to study or anything, but there was no other way to get Sendai-san to stay quiet for a while. Technically, I could've ordered her to finish my homework for me, but then it'd leave me with nothing to do.

I felt like if I didn't keep myself occupied, I'd end up doing something I'd regret.

「Oh, sure. Pass it over to me.」

Sendai-san got off the bed and sat right next to me.

「No, I'm going to do it myself. You can do whatever you want, Sendai-san.」

I repositioned myself so that Sendai-san was seated across from me again. Then, I pulled out my math textbook and notebook and placed them on the table.

「Whoa, you're doing your own homework today, Miyagi?」

Sendai-san's surprised tone sounded clearly exaggerated.

「Yeah, and?」

「You're not going to make me do it for you?」

「No.」

「Whoa, someone's acting diligent all of a sudden.」

「I've always been diligent.」

「Hmm, I guess I should start on my homework too.」

Sendai-san said, sounding a bit unmotivated as she pulled out an English textbook and notebook from her bag. Then, she placed some worksheets on the table.

Not long after, I could hear the sound of her pencil scribbling across the papers.

I focused my attention on my math textbook.

The textbook was filled with a bunch of numbers, confusing symbols, and random letters from the alphabet. Just gazing at it left me feeling dizzy. Perhaps some people found beauty in the language of math, but to me, it just looked like an array of unsolvable code.

However, if I didn't solve the questions, I wouldn't be able to finish my homework. So, I mentally searched for the formulas to apply. Yet, even though I had learned the formulas, I struggled to find them in my mind.

I glanced over at Sendai-san.

Her handwriting was as neat as always.

Even the sound of the pencil gliding across the paper was seamless. I couldn't help but feel envious of Sendai-san, who made it appear as though there was no problem she couldn't solve.

I went back to the math problem that I was having trouble solving.

I slowly attempted to answer the question with brief pauses here and there.

I wasn't making as much progress with my homework as I'd hoped.

In fact, it felt like the only thing that was moving forward in this room was time.

As my eyes flickered trying to keep track of the numbers on the page, a small sigh escaped me. Suddenly, a pencil rolled across from the other side, and when I looked up, I found Sendai-san staring at me.

「Are you done?」

「"Done?" It feels like there's no end to it.」

I answered bluntly as I returned the pencil to her. When I dropped my gaze to focus on my homework again, I felt something poking me at the top of my head.

「That hurts, Sendai-san. Don't bother me.」

「Do you want me to teach you?」

I'll think it through myself.

Before I could answer with that, Sendai-san came to my side.

「I don't need you to teach me anything.」

「Well, it's not like I have anything else to do.」

She said as she snuck a glance at my notebook. I shoved her by the shoulder to create some distance between us.

「Go read some manga or something, like you usually do.」

「I think I've already read through pretty much everything by now.」

「I bought a few new books, so go read those.」

I bought two new volumes this past week.

Those two books should've been enough to pass the time with.

However, instead of grabbing a manga, Sendai-san took my notebook and pointed at something around the middle.

「You made a mistake here.」

「Huh?」

「You made a miscalculation. Oh, and same thing here.」

Sendai-san picked up her pencil. Then, despite the fact I hadn't asked for it, she started explaining and correcting the questions I got wrong.

Her explanations were easy to understand.

She taught so well that even I had no troubles with keeping up.

However, I felt strange about the lack of distance between us.

「Wait, Sendai-san, you're too close.」

Even though there should've been some space between us, right now, we were so close that our uniforms were touching.

「You think so?」

「You've been getting overly familiar lately. It's kind of annoying, so back off.」

I pushed Sendai-san's arm away to the edge of the table.

「Don't you think it's a little cruel to call me "annoying"?」

「No. Plus, it gets too hot when you stick too close to me.」

Despite being only mid-May, the weather felt more like summer. Regardless of who it was, I wouldn't want anyone getting

too close to me in this kind of heat.

「Is that the only reason you don't want me being right next to you?」

「It is. I'll do the rest by myself, so you go over there, Sendai-san.」

I said, pointing at the bookshelf.

As I mentioned the titles of the new books I had bought, I retrieved my textbook and notebook, which had somehow ended up near Sendai-san. However, she didn't get up to grab the manga. Instead, for some reason, she closed the distance between us and pulled the textbook and notebook back towards her.

「Didn't I just say it was too hot?」

「I don't feel hot though.」

「Don't lie to me. Aren't you supposed to be sensitive to the heat?」

Sendai-san always took off her blazer during the winter, probably because the temperature of my space heater was always set on high.

My idea of the perfect temperature was different from hers.

Considering my natural sensitivity to the cold, if I found the room hot, it was likely even more uncomfortable for Sendai-san.

「Well, if we do this, then it won't be so hot anymore.」

Sendai-san took the remote control for the air conditioner from the table and turned it on.

「Don't just turn that on without my permission.」

I grabbed the remote control from her and turned it back off.

What was this?

Why was Sendai-san messing with me even more than before?

「Hey, Miyagi.」

I couldn't be bothered to deal with her anymore.

I ignored her and went back to focusing on my homework.

I picked up my pencil and tried to continue with the problem I had left off on.

However, Sendai-san also chose to ignore my desire to finish my homework.

「Here.」

She gently stroked my neck with her fingertips.

When I reflexively raised my head to look at her, she stuck her hand to the side of my neck.

「You know why I'm touching you here, don't you?」

Sendai-san said quietly and followed up with,

「Why did you kiss me here while I was asleep?」

Her hand started stroking the side of my neck once again.

「If you knew from the start, how come you didn't ask the day it happened? Why are you asking about it now?」

「Don't answer my question with another question.」

She didn't sound angry.

But she wasn't speaking with a gentle tone in her voice either.

I Don't Care If Sendai-san Noticed (III)

Part 31

Sendai-san had every right to ask.

When I thought back to what I'd done, I felt it was only right if I answered her question.

But if you were to ask me "why" I did it, I wouldn't have an answer. Even I wanted to know why I did it.

「Answer me, Miyagi.」

She quietly urged for a response as I peeled her hand off my neck.

「I didn't kiss your neck. I just touched it with my lips.」

「You know, normally people don't "touch" a place like that with their lips.」

「Looks like you know the answer already. It wasn't meant to be "normal".」

Sendai-san was right.

Normally, I would never touch her neck with my lips.

But I did it intentionally.

I could remember it clearly.

However, I couldn't really justify why I did it. There wasn't a specific reason behind my actions, and even if there was, I wasn't conscious of it myself.

I closed my textbook as if trying to avoid Sendai-san's gaze.

If I were to order her to stop asking about this, I could forcibly bring this awkward tension to an end. However, if I did that, she

would definitely bring the topic up again at every given opportunity.

The idea of that alone seemed bothersome.

「It's not like I did anything else to you, so it's fine, isn't it? Is that a good enough answer for you?」

I added, as if I was trying to come up with excuses to a teacher. However, I felt a tug on the sleeve of my blouse. Even though I didn't really want to look at Sendai-san right now, the serious expression on her face compelled me to meet her gaze.

「What about now? Do you still want to touch me?」

I had no idea why she'd even ask something like that.

Plus, I wasn't sure if she was satisfied with my answer or not.

Just like usual, there was something off about her sense of distance. She was sticking close to my side, still gripping onto my sleeve. I wanted her to back off a bit, but the mood felt tense, and I had a hunch that she wouldn't let go until I answered her.

「What, are you ordering me to answer that?」

「The only person who can issue orders is you, isn't it? I'm just asking you a question.」

「If I said I wanted to touch you, would you let me?」

「Where do you want to touch me?」

「Remind me, who was the one that told me I couldn't answer a question with another question again?」

「Well? Everything depends on your answer now, Miyagi.」

She was willing to let me touch her, but only in certain places.

At least, I think that was what she was trying to say.

But why?

Sendai-san was saying a lot of things she typically wouldn't, which was throwing me off.

If I just tell her where I want to touch her, then…

No, there was a possibility she was doing this just to tease me.

Besides, did I even want to touch her right now?

Numerous thoughts appeared in my mind and vanished like soda bubbles. Fragments of memories began to resurface, including the image of Sendai-san sleeping on my bed.

I suddenly remembered I had also touched Sendai-san's lips that day.

Before I stroked the side of her neck, I had traced her lips – which felt as soft as a marshmallow – with my fingers.

If given the chance, that was where I wanted to touch her again.

I extended an arm out towards Sendai-san.

I didn't respond to her question, yet she didn't retreat either, as if she already understood my intentions. Releasing her hold on my sleeve, my fingertips brushed against her lips.

Like last time, they felt soft to the touch.

When I gently pressed down on them, I felt Sendai-san attempting to lick my finger, causing me to pull my hand away in a panic.

「Give me an order.」

Sendai-san spoke in a slightly low voice.

However, the timing and nature of my orders were for me to decide, not Sendai-san.

「Miyagi.」

She said my name firmly, as if urging me to do it.

It was a bit irritating that Sendai-san was trying to push me to order her around, especially since she had no right to do so.

That was what I thought to myself.

Yet, I couldn't bring myself to say anything about it.

「…… Close your eyes.」

「Okay.」

This is all wrong.

If she understood the true implication of the order I had just given, she should be objecting at this moment. Yet, for some reason, Sendai-san voluntarily shut her eyes. Despite being fully aware of what was to come, she still complied.

I brushed her cheek with my hand.

I glanced at her eyes, then her nose, and finally, her mouth.

With facial features arranged slightly better than the average person's, Sendai-san possessed a well-proportioned face. While not on the same level as a model or an idol, her appearance could still be described as beautiful.

In reality, I would normally never be able to invite someone like Sendai-san around to my house, let alone order her around. There was no way she'd even remember someone like me the moment we were placed in separate classes.

In fact, we had never spoken to each other up until that day I gave her five-thousand yen at the bookstore.

That's why I think a line like this is something we shouldn't cross.

I don't understand why Sendai-san willingly closed her eyes.

Perhaps she had planned to open them the moment I got closer and then laugh it off as a joke. While I didn't think Sendai-san was the type of person to do that, I wanted to go through every

possibility in my head.

Despite that, my body inched closer towards Sendai-san.

Before I knew it, the distance between our lips was less than five centimeters apart.

My heart ached.

I felt like I was having a hard time catching my breath.

In fact, I think I might've forgotten how to breathe at all.

Using the thumb of the hand that was still resting on her cheek, I gently traced her lips.

Sendai-san didn't move at all.

I brought my face closer to hers, closing my eyes as well.

—— Was it really okay for me to touch her like this?

If I kiss Sendai-san right now, there's a chance she might never come here again.

As soon as that thought crossed my mind, I instinctively pushed her away by her shoulders.

「Sorry. You should go home for today.」

「Huh?」

Sendai-san opened her eyes.

「Miyagi?」

She asked, sounding startled.

I pulled her by the hand to force her up and shoved her bag towards her. Then, I opened the door and pushed her out.

I wasn't sure what the correct thing to say or do was, and my thoughts were all over the place. Despite knowing there were better ways to handle the situation than forcibly sending her away, my

mind was too much of a mess at the moment to think clearly. Most importantly, I just didn't want Sendai-san to see my face right now.

Don't turn around. Please, just go home for today.

「Hey!」

Sendai-san, who seemed unwilling to leave quietly, attempted to turn around, but I forced her to the entrance.

「Sorry. I'll contact you soon.」

"Why? What's going on? We need to talk."

Sendai-san kept saying things along those lines, but nothing was getting through to me.

For the time being, I made her put on her shoes and then chased her out of the front door.

「Hey, Miyagi! Open up!」

I could hear the sound of knocking on the door.

However, I had no intention of opening it.

If I did, she would definitely unleash her anger at me.

Usually, I'd see her off on the ground floor entrance of the apartment, but I couldn't bring myself to do so today.

「Miyagi!」

Sendai-san kept calling my name from the other side of the door.

Why did the thought of kissing her even cross my mind in the first place?

And why didn't I kiss her?

Unable to make sense of my own thoughts, I leaned my body against the door.

A heavy thudding sound reverberated against my back.

Come to think of it, I forgot to ask her about my eraser.

That was something that I remembered just now.

Chapter 10

Miyagi's The One in The Wrong (I)

(Sendai PoV)

Part 32

Something's strange.

Something is definitely wrong.

I stopped knocking on Miyagi's door.

Even if I were to keep going, she wasn't going to come out anyway, and I didn't want to be a nuisance to her neighbors.

But I wasn't happy with this situation.

I mean, Miyagi was acting way too strange.

Why did I get chased out of her room in the first place?

I didn't even do anything.

If anything, it was Miyagi who was on the verge of doing "something", and if anyone had the right to be dissatisfied about that "something", it should have been me. Yet, Miyagi was the one in a bad mood for some reason.

Something like this had happened before.

I turned my back to her front door as I briefly thought back to the beginning of the new school year.

As I gazed down at the city from the sixth floor, all I could see were people and cars; the view felt quite lacking. The upscale apartment building seemed to prioritize convenience over having a good scenery.

It all seemed so boring.

The scenery.

Miyagi.

Just… everything.

I took a deep breath and headed for the elevator. Usually, Miyagi would ride it with me, but today, I was alone.

I left through the entrance of the apartment building and walked through the dimly lit streets.

At the very least, Miyagi didn't seem to hate me or anything.

While we weren't exactly friends – let alone lovers – I did sense some form of affection from her, so her decision to kick me out seemed strange to me.

「Come on… Now it just seems like I was the one who did something wrong.」

It was Miyagi who had ordered me to close my eyes. She was the one who attempted to kiss me. Yet, she abruptly stopped and then sent me home for the day, as if it were something she could just decide on her own. To leave things half-finished and chase me away without even discussing things properly was not a great way to maintain obedience from me.

…… Well, no, that wasn't entirely true.

Miyagi didn't make me obey her.

I was the one who pushed her into issuing me the order.

What would happen if I let Miyagi kiss me?

I wanted to know the answer, so I made her give me an order.

However, it was Miyagi who decided what it would entail.

Ultimately, she was the one with the final say, so it was only fair that she assumed responsibility for what happened.

I don't care if it seems like I'm just taking my frustrations out on her – it was much worse on her part to abruptly stop things the way she did.

I quickened my pace.

I rushed back home so fast that I was almost out of breath. I went up to my room and shut myself in. Although I felt a bit hungry, I couldn't muster the appetite to have dinner. I changed out of my uniform and into more comfortable clothes before pulling my wallet out of my bag.

「Even if I try to give this back to her, she's not going to take it.」

I didn't think what I did today was worth five-thousand yen.

If possible, I wanted to give the money back to her, but knowing Miyagi, she'd just stubbornly decline. On that note, I wasn't sure if she even wanted anything to do with me anymore.

I stuffed the five-thousand-yen bill into my piggy bank and then lifted it up.

I wasn't sure if the piggy bank had gotten heavier or not, but the balance had grown by another five-thousand yen. If anything, the money I had put in felt like a weight on my conscience.

「You're such an idiot, Miyagi…」

I lobbed my complaint at the piggy bank as I flopped onto my bed.

Whenever situations like this came up, Miyagi usually kept her distance from me.

The same thing happened after she poured soda on me before the start of spring break.

She ran away from me and stopped contacting me.

Sometimes, she'd act impulsively and do something crazy, but when it came to facing the consequences, she'd choose to avoid them instead.

That was her way of “solving” her problems.

「You’re just going to do the same thing again this time, aren’t you?」

In the end, my prediction came true, and I didn’t hear from Miyagi over the next four days.

I stared at my phone screen in the classroom after school.

You could say that it had only been four days, but considering what had happened between me and Miyagi, it felt like an eternity had gone by. Though there have been times where we’d go this long without seeing each other before, I felt like it’d be another week or two before I’d hear from her again.

On that day, Miyagi, who had never apologized to me before, extended an apology.

I wasn’t exactly sure what led her to do so, but whatever it was seemed to be the reason Miyagi was avoiding me.

I put my phone in my bag and went over to Umina’s desk. She and Mariko had been excitedly discussing their plans for after school. When I called out to them, they filled me in on their decision.

「I was just talking to Mariko about what to do, but you wanna just hit the usual spots today?」

「Sorry, I have prep school, so I can’t go. But invite me again next time.」

「Whaat? Can’t you just like, skip it every once in a while?」

「It’d be a huge pain if my parents ever found out.」

「Oh come on, just let them be angry.」

Mariko backed up Umina’s irresponsible suggestion with a casual, “Yeah, exactly.”

「Sorry. I’ll treat you guys to something next time.」

The three of us headed towards our shoe lockers as I suggested a few ideas for things to treat them to. After changing out of our indoor shoes, we walked to the school's front gate and said our goodbyes. Once their figures were out of sight, I took a different path than the one leading to my prep school.

I'd never skipped prep school before, but I had no plans of going today.

I felt a little bad for Umina and the others, but I had something else I needed to do.

My destination was Miyagi's apartment.

I walked along the path I'd grown so used to taking at a brisk pace.

There was only one thing to do now that I'd come this far.

I called for Miyagi from the intercom at the front entrance of the building. However, there was no response.

「Well, of course she wasn't going pick up.」

Once.

Twice.

And then a third time.

I continuously called her on the intercom, but Miyagi's voice never came through.

Well, I guess I should've expected this.

I pulled out my phone and sent Miyagi a text.

I'd never arranged our hangouts before, but this was the second time I was taking the initiative to message her. Both times were to get her to answer me.

『Miyagi, answer the intercom.』

『I know you're there.』

『Don't just ignore me. Let me in.』

Some of the messages I sent were being marked as "read", but she didn't reply to any of them. Feeling irritated by her lack of common courtesy, I continued ringing the intercom.

Something like this had happened around the start of the new school year when our classrooms were reassigned. Last time I did this, she ended up letting me in, but today, she didn't answer the intercom or reply to any of my messages.

I was getting annoyed.

Very annoyed.

For the first time ever, I decided to call her on her phone.

Although I'd expected as much, the phone kept on ringing, and I wasn't able to hear Miyagi's voice through it either.

『Pick up the phone.』

My messages stopped being marked as "read".

「How can you even be this avoidant? Are you a child or something?」

Midterm exams were approaching.

Now wasn't the time for me to be standing out here, bombarding Miyagi with texts. However, if we didn't address the tension between us, I doubt I'd be able to concentrate on studying anyway. At this point, it felt like anything I attempt to memorize wouldn't stick for very long.

It was all Miyagi's fault that I was such a mess right now.

My emotions felt wavering and unstable, like an unrelenting dizziness.

I decided to leave her apartment building and head home.

None of this was a big deal or anything.

I mean, to begin with, it didn't really bother me if my connection with Miyagi came to an end. While it was a bit of a shame considering our arrangement was supposed to continue until graduation, I didn't mind too much if it ended a bit sooner.

Sure, I may be losing the one place I felt most comfortable being myself, but I'm confident I'll find another place like that in the future.

But I wasn't going to let things end so half-heartedly, especially considering the situation we were in.

I wasn't sure how I found my way back, but I managed to make it home.

If anything, I probably just took my usual path back.

Apart from Miyagi ignoring me, nothing about my daily life had changed.

When I went back to my room, I glanced over at my desk.

All I needed was one simple excuse.

I put the eraser I took from Miyagi into my pencil case.

Miyagi's The One in The Wrong (II)

Part 33

The teacher talked way too much, to the point where I was starting to think he was doing it on purpose.

After what felt like forever, the bell finally rang.

I closed my textbook and notebook and took out a certain eraser from my pencil case. I impatiently tapped my foot on the floor, silently urging the teacher to leave.

Come on, hurry up already.

I was glaring so hard at the teacher it felt like I was about to burn a hole through his head. After he distributed today's homework and went over the assignment, he finally left the classroom.

I quickly cleaned up my desk and walked over to Umina's seat.

「Sorry, you guys should start eating without me. There's something I need to take care of first.」

Lunch break was a bit longer than recess, but when I thought about what I needed to do, I felt like it wasn't long enough.

「Sure, but where are you going?」

「Oh, I just need to stop by the class next door.」

I said before exiting the classroom.

I walked down the hallway with a certain eraser in my hand.

I was about to reunite it with its owner.

Class 1 was just a short walk down the hallway. As soon as I got to the entrance, a girl who was nearby came to meet me. We exchanged smiles, and after I explained the reason for my visit, she

turned around and called out to Miyagi.

「Miyagi-saaan!」

「What is it?」

Miyagi replied.

Her voice came from somewhere around the second-to-last row of desks.

Miyagi, who was sitting with her friends, had a perplexed look on her face. The girl who called out to her on my behalf then added, “Your friend’s here to see you,” which seemed to fan the flames even more.

Miyagi grimaced as soon as she heard those words.

But it only lasted for a second.

As expected, she wouldn’t lash out at me while we were at school.

As much as I thought it’d make for an interesting sight, Miyagi seemed determined to keep her composed demeanor. Meanwhile, her friends appeared surprised that I’d been referred to as her “friend”. After a brief exchange with them, Miyagi finally made her way over to me while wearing an ambiguous expression on her face.

「…… We’re at school, you know.」

Miyagi said with a displeased tone in her voice as she furrowed her brows.

「I’m aware.」

「Okay, then don’t talk to me. Wasn’t that one of our rules?」

She snapped at me, her voice filled with nothing but dissatisfaction.

However, she seemed to be conscious of the fact that our conversation could be overheard by others, so she spoke in a hushed tone, ensuring only I could hear her.

「Look, I found this in my pocket. I just wanted to return this to its owner, so it's not that weird for me to come find you at school, right?」

I showed Miyagi the eraser in my hand.

「You—」

「"You don't need to return it. You can just keep it." Was that what you were going to say?」

Miyagi fell silent after I took the words out of her mouth.

I mean, of course I knew what she was going to say.

Miyagi and I had spent enough time together for me to understand that much about her.

「I'm willing to keep it, but first, we need to talk.」

I put the eraser into my skirt pocket and then grabbed Miyagi by the arm.

「Huh? Wait, what are you-」

「We stand out too much here. Just come with me.」

To be honest, we probably attracted a lot of attention already.

But going somewhere else was a lot better than standing around and having a conversation by the entrance of a classroom.

I dragged Miyagi along with me as I walked.

Since it was lunchtime, there were a lot of people in the hallways, so pulling Miyagi by the hand was probably attracting even more attention than before. It seemed Miyagi had noticed that as well, so she immediately shook me off and started walking on her own. She probably knew that if she tried to run away, I'd just go after her again, so she silently followed me without complaining.

We reached the far end of the old school building, and I ushered the unusually compliant Miyagi into the music preparation

room. As we ventured further inside, we found ourselves surrounded by a bunch of instruments, some of which I was familiar with and others I had never seen before.

「Why did you bring me here? I was in the middle of eating my lunch, you know.」

Now that we were in a room where people rarely visited during breaks, Miyagi no longer hid her sour mood. I could tell she was upset as I had heard that low tone of her voice on multiple other occasions.

「Well, if I didn't bring you here, you wouldn't even talk to me. You'd just run away again.」

I leaned against the shelf where some of the instruments were stored and grabbed Miyagi by the arm again.

Miyagi, with an expression devoid of any friendliness, made no attempt to resist. Instead, she stood before me silently, her arm still held in my grasp.

「I thought we promised not to talk to each other at school.」

「Actually, you were the one who said that you wouldn't interact with me at school, and that you'd only communicate with me through our phones. But I never said I'd do the same.」

To be honest, I didn't think my argument held any water.

I agreed to the rules that Miyagi set last year under the idea that they applied to me as well, so technically, Miyagi was in the right here. However, I needed something to help me bluff my way out.

I had something to ask Miyagi, and I had things I wanted to say as well.

「…… Well, even if that is the case, I don't have anything to say to you.」

Miyagi said, seemingly willing to let my bluff slide, but she shot me a resentful glare in return.

「You might not, but I do.」

「Okay, then just tell me about it the next time you come over.」

「You never call for me whenever things like this happen. It's almost as if you're just willing to let it end like this.」

「I will contact you.」

「When?」

「…… Soon.」

Miyagi spoke with a tone of uncertainty in her voice. Her words didn't seem to convey any intention of reaching out to me.

Yep, as I thought, I need to get the answers from her right here, right now.

If I let go of her now, Miyagi might actually end up calling it quits.

I applied more pressure to the hand that was grabbing onto her arm.

「I need to ask you something. Just answer me.」

Without waiting for her response, I continued.

「Why did you chase me out?」

My voice echoed in the worn-out preparation room.

Miyagi remained silent and still. The polished instruments, though seemingly out of place in the weathered preparation room, did nothing to alleviate the stagnant atmosphere between us.

「Answer me.」

When I tugged on her arm, Miyagi took a step away from me, as if implying she had no intention of responding to my question.

「You can't order me around.」

「Oh, no, I can do whatever I want. This isn't your house, Miyagi.」

Miyagi could only issue orders when we were at her place.

She was basically buying the right to order me around for the price of five-thousand yen.

That was a rule we established together, but it didn't apply at school.

「We took care of all of our business and there was nothing left to do, so I let you go home. I didn't chase you out.」

Miyagi said, sounding like she'd given up. She continued with「So, are we done here?」as she tried to shake my hand off. However, I wasn't going to let her go so easily.

「You call that "taking care of our business"?」

「I ordered you to close your eyes, and that's exactly what you did. That was all I wanted from you, so there was nothing left to do.」

「Was that really all you wanted from that order?」

「Wasn't that what I just said?」

「It felt like you wanted to do something to me though. Are you really okay with how things ended up?」

I never really thought of myself as a particularly honest person to begin with, but whenever I was with Miyagi, I was even more aware of it. Especially right now. Even though I was the one who encouraged her to do that "something" to me, I now found myself pressuring Miyagi for answers.

But things weren't going as well as I'd hoped.

「That's just your imagination, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi refrained from giving me a real answer and managed to shake my hand away.

As she turned her back towards me and tried to leave the music preparation room, I started feeling a bit uneasy.

「Oh, right. Miyagi, have you started studying for exams yet?」

I called out to her, asking the first question that came to mind. Miyagi turned around and faced me, wearing a dubious expression on her face.

「Why are you asking about that all of a sudden?」

「See, I haven't started studying yet, and it's your fault that I can't make any progress, so you better take some responsibility for it.」

「I don't get what you're trying to say.」

「Do you have your phone on you right now?」

「Do I really have to answer that?」

「I'm just asking you a simple "yes" or "no" question.」

「…… I left it in the classroom.」

「You better call for me today.」

I wasn't about to send her a message first.

That was Miyagi's duty, after all.

Of course, there'd no exception today either.

I wasn't in the mood to play nice or pamper her.

「What if I said I didn't want to?」

Miyagi asked with an annoyed look on her face.

Her current focus appeared to be solely on returning to her classroom, and that irritated me.

「I don't care if you don't want to. You better do it. Oh, and

before I forget, let me return your eraser to you.」

I approached Miyagi while staring her straight in the eye.

Then, I grabbed her by the wrist and forced the eraser into her hand.

「I don't need it. You can keep it.」

「Fine, then I'll just take it from you the next time I come over.」

After placing the eraser in her hand, I stormed out of the music preparation room, leaving Miyagi behind.

When I returned to my classroom, there was no time left for me to eat my lunch, so I prepared for my next class instead.

I tossed some candy in my mouth to keep my empty stomach occupied for a little while.

After sitting through a few more lectures, the school day eventually came to an end.

When I checked my phone, I noticed I had received a text from Miyagi.

Miyagi's The One in The Wrong (III)

Part 34

I hadn't rushed to get here.

Yet, somehow, I arrived earlier than I typically would.

After taking a deep breath, I opened the door to find Miyagi waiting for me. Before I could close the door, she tried to hand me a five-thousand-yen bill.

「I don't want it. I was the one who made you call for me today.」

Usually, I accepted the bill without question.

That was the arrangement we had, and something I'd gotten used to.

However, today I pushed the bill away and then took off my shoes. I tried to make my way towards Miyagi's room, but the owner of the room blocked my path, preventing me from passing through.

「I didn't summon you because you told me to. I did it because I wanted to, so I'm still going to pay you.」

Even though we were at her home now, Miyagi's mood still seemed sour. The expression on her face looked bored, as it often did.

「Are you going to order me to do something today?」

「…… Yeah.」

Miyagi mumbled quietly as she extended the five-thousand-yen bill out to me again.

No matter how you looked at it, she clearly had no plan in mind.

But it'd be a problem if we were to get into another argument and I got kicked out again.

「Okay, fine.」

After taking the five-thousand yen from her, I stuffed the bill into my wallet. Miyagi, who had been blocking the corridor earlier, said, "I'll bring you some tea," and headed towards the kitchen.

Without waiting for Miyagi, I went to her room first and set my bag down. After loosening my necktie and unbuttoning my blouse, I sat on the floor, leaning my back against her bed.

I'd been to Miyagi's house many times before, but today was the first time I felt this restless.

I didn't feel like reading manga, and lying on her bed to wait for her didn't seem appealing to me either.

To be honest, Miyagi wasn't the only one without a plan in mind.

I came here with a resolute determination, dissatisfied with Miyagi's efforts to erase not only our memories within this room but our entire connection, as if she were using an eraser to wipe everything away. Yet, I found myself struggling to find the right words. Although it had been less than a year since I began interacting with Miyagi, today felt like the day when I was most unsure about what to say.

As I heaved a heavy sigh, Miyagi entered the room with a tray holding two cups and a small plate that I had never seen before.

「Here, eat this.」

She said curtly, placing the small plate on the table.

「A castella cake?」

That's rare.

It had been a while since I last saw castella cake, but the most unusual part was being served food in this room. Typically, Miyagi

only ever brought tea and soda here.

「You didn't have lunch today, right? Honestly, I think you reap what you sow.」

「Oh? Looks like someone's being nice to me today.」

「That's just a leftover. I thought it'd be a waste to throw it away…… But if you're not going to eat it, I'll get rid of it.」

Miyagi said as she sat down on the bed without taking a bite of the castella cake.

「No, I'll eat it.」

I wasn't sure if castella cakes were traditionally eaten with a fork, but since there was one placed beside the plate, I decided to use it to bring the exquisite egg-colored dessert to my mouth.

It was extremely soft and sweet. The crunchy texture of the caramelized sugar at the bottom was also delicious, prompting me to take another bite.

I swallowed a piece and took a sip of barley tea.

It was just as Miyagi said – I had missed out on lunch today.

I turned down Umina's invitation to hang out after school and came here directly without making any detours, so I hadn't had a chance to eat anything.

But that should've been the same with Miyagi.

「Aren't you going to eat anything?」

「I already ate.」

Miyagi said, though I couldn't discern the truth behind her words. She idly swung her legs, still wearing a bored expression on her face. She seemed like she had nothing to do and was merely trying to pass the time, yet there was also an air of restlessness to her.

Although it was poor manners, I lightly poked her leg with the

fork from a slight distance away.

「Ouch.」

She stopped swaying her legs and glared daggers at me.

「Do you want me to lick it?」

「You don't have to. Also, I'm the one who decides what order to give you.」

Miyagi, now wary of me, pulled her legs up onto her bed and hugged her knees.

「Don't talk to me at school anymore.」

「Is that an order?」

Miyagi didn't reply.

Instead, she stayed silent and looked away from me.

I reached out and pinched the hem of Miyagi's skirt as I approached her.

However, my hand was quickly brushed away.

「I had a rough time today because of you, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi said in a slightly low voice without answering my earlier question. She continued with,

「When you came by to my classroom, Maika and Ami kept asking me a bunch of questions. Even after I went back, they were extremely curious about what business you had with me, so it was kind of a hassle to deal with.」

「What did you tell them?」

「I told them you were asking me for money.」

「…… Seriously?」

「No. I told them you came to inform me that a teacher was

looking for me, and that I went straight to the staff faculty room after. But they didn't seem to believe me.」

Well, of course they wouldn't.

From their perspective, I was someone who had never interacted with her before. To them, it must've seemed like I came out of nowhere and then whisked her away somewhere, so it was only natural for them to be curious. If anything, it would've been weirder if they weren't interested.

「It was a pain to deal with, so don't come find me at school anymore.」

Miyagi said as she got off the bed and took a seat a little distance away from me.

「Aren't you sitting kind of far away?」

「That's because I know if I don't, you're going to do something weird again, Sendai-san.」

「No, I won't. If anything, you're the one that's always doing something weird.」

I said in an attempt to defend myself.

Besides, strange things only ever happened if I was ordered to do them.

As long as Miyagi didn't issue any weird orders, there'd be no reason for them to happen, so it was wrong to pin the blame on me. That being said, she seemed to think differently.

「I don't want to hear that from you, Sendai-san. You were trying to lift my skirt just now too.」

「All I did was tug on it a little. You always seem to have some kind of rebuttal ready, huh.」

「That's because you keep saying things that have to be refuted. Also, what's with you today? Why are you talking so much?」

It was true that I was talking a lot more than usual.

Although her room was normally comfortable to be in, for some reason, today I found it difficult to settle in. I kept moving my mouth as if trying to distract myself from this discomfort. It felt as if I were back in the days when I couldn't quite get used to being in this room, and I had the urge to keep talking to fill the silence.

But I wasn't the only one doing it.

「That should be my line. You're talking a lot more than usual too, Miyagi.」

It was rare to hear Miyagi talk about what happened at school without being asked about it. She typically never served snacks in her room, and she hardly ever paid any attention to me.

But today was different.

There was no other word to describe it.

「No, I'm not.」

Miyagi mumbled as she pulled her schoolbag towards her. Then, she pulled something out of the bag and pushed it towards me.

「You came to get this, didn't you? I already said this when we were at school, but you can keep it.」

Miyagi said, sounding irritated.

I stared at the hand that had been extended towards me. She was holding the eraser I'd returned to her earlier.

However, instead of taking the eraser, I grabbed her by the wrist.

Miyagi looked surprised, but I brushed the fingers that were holding onto the eraser, bringing them to my lips, and I started licking them.

Her fingers were a bit cold, and they didn't taste like blood or the flavor of potato chips.

As my tongue wrapped around her fingers, the eraser fell to the floor.

Miyagi moved her hand and grazed it against my cheek to pull herself away.

「Stop doing things like that.」

She shook the hand that I was grabbing her with off and pushed me against the forehead.

「Well, you're not giving me any orders.」

「If I order you to go home right now, would you do it?」

「Yes, if that's what you want.」

The rules we came up with were absolute, and I intended to follow them.

But I knew Miyagi would never issue that order.

If she really wanted me to go home, she'd chase me out like last time instead of asking a hypothetical question.

「…… That's not fair.」

Miyagi mumbled under her breath.

「You call that unfair? I think you should just tell me what you really want me to do.」

「I don't want anything from you.」

「Fine, then I'll just give the money back to you.」

「I don't need it.」

「Well, in that case, order me to do something. Isn't that part of our arrangement?」

The two of us were different in a lot of ways, but we also had a few similarities.

I wasn't a big fan of the term "school hierarchy", but if I had to categorize things that way, I'd say I hovered around the top. More specifically, I probably belonged in the lower end among the upper ranks.

Miyagi wasn't exactly at the bottom, but she wasn't near the top either.

I was doing everything in my power to avoid falling from the top, while Miyagi was steadfastly holding her ground to prevent descending to the bottom. Our lack of full commitment made us alike.

Plus, we both viewed each other as useful and convenient.

Miyagi gave me a place to relax away from home, and I did whatever Miyagi wanted me to do.

So it wasn't all that strange for us to be interested in each other.

—— I squeezed my hands into fists.

I knew I wasn't being very honest with myself.

I had already known the answer. I kept coming up with various explanations to justify my reasoning, but the truth was simple. I just wanted to kiss Miyagi and then see what would happen once I did. Right here, right now.

「You already know what you want me to do, right?」

I closed the distance between us.

As I did so, she gave me an order that was clearer than last time.

「Sendai-san, I want you to do it to me.」

「Do what?」

「…… Kiss me.」

What should I do?

I'd been entrusted with the final say. However, since I didn't have the right to refuse an order, there was only one thing I could do.

I leaned closer to Miyagi and combed her hair with my fingers.

Her hair, extending just beyond her shoulders, was black and silky.

I put my hand on her cheek and slowly brought her face closer to mine.

However, for some reason, Miyagi never broke eye contact with me.

「Close your eyes.」

「Shut up, Sendai-san. I'll close them when I want to.」

You could argue that since we weren't friends or lovers, there was no need for any sort of atmosphere between us, but the mood felt kind of off. Though, you could also argue that this was just Miyagi being Miyagi.

With no way to change the situation, I entrusted her with the decision of when to close her eyes and leaned in. As I closed the distance between us, just as the awkwardness began to sink in, Miyagi closed her eyes, as if intentionally avoiding mine.

I found that part of her cute.

I wanted to stare at her a bit longer, but I soon closed my eyes as well.

Then, my lips touched hers.

My heart didn't seem to race.

But I was definitely nervous.

I was extremely conscious of the vivid sensation of her lips.

It felt soft and warm.

I couldn't tell if I was holding my breath or not, but right now, I felt incredibly close to Miyagi.

Our lips parted.

It didn't taste like anything.

Though, it would've been a whole different issue if our kiss was intense enough to leave behind a lingering taste.

I stared at Miyagi, but she wouldn't look me in the eye.

I want to do it again.

I thought to myself as I tried to close the distance between us once more.

When I placed my hands on her shoulders and tried to bring her face closer to mine, she pushed me away.

「Are you trying to do it again or something?」

She said, sounding displeased.

「You told me to do it, didn't you?」

「I didn't say you could do it twice.」

「You're so stingy, Miyagi.」

I complained as I stroked my hand against Miyagi's neck.

Her body temperature felt higher than usual.

「Hey, order me to do it again.」

Miyagi wore a blatant frown on her face.

But after a short pause, she said something in a quiet voice.

「Do it again.」

I leaned in towards the source of the voice, closing the gap once more.

The space that existed between us vanished in the blink of an eye, and we shared our second kiss.

I hadn't noticed it the first time, but this felt really good.

A surge of warmth spread from where we touched. As if a switch had been triggered within me, I guided my tongue towards her lips. Our body heat blended more intensely than when we were just touching each other with our fingers, blurring the lines that separated us.

Miyagi's lips parted slightly as she let a breath escape.

Hearing her faint labored breathing made my ears tingle.

Miyagi was grasping onto my sweater vest.

More. I wanted more.

I wanted to explore the inside of Miyagi's mouth.

I parted my lips slightly and tried to sneak my tongue into her mouth, but I was rejected. She bit my lip out of protest and then shoved me away.

「I didn't say you could go that far.」

「A kiss is a kiss, isn't it?」

「Anyway, that's enough.」

Miyagi said with a sharp tone as she pulled back slightly from me.

「So, what now?」

Miyagi asked, tossing a tissue box with a crocodile cover on it at me, while avoiding making eye contact.

「What do you mean?」

「Doesn't this make things awkward between us?」

Well, I guess she had a point.

We weren't friends, let alone lovers. It wouldn't be weird to feel awkward over kissing someone who was neither of those things.

Personally, I didn't think it mattered.

A couple of kisses weren't going to soften Miyagi's attitude towards me or anything.

She'll probably continue shooting complaints at me, one after another, with those sharp and prickly words of hers. In fact, I think it'd be even more unsettling if she were to suddenly start acting friendlier towards me. While some things might eventually change, for now, I just wanted to leave things as they were.

「How can you be so smart, yet so dumb at the same time, Sendai-san?」

Miyagi said as she heaved a sigh.

「I'll admit I can be kind of dumb sometimes, but I'm definitely not smart.」

If I were smart, I would be able to meet my parents' expectations.

I would have gone to a different high school, where I wouldn't have crossed paths with Miyagi.

「It's only going to feel awkward for the first little while anyway.」

I said, casually brushing her worries off, as I flopped onto her bed.

It was fine if Miyagi stayed the same as she was now. It was also better if things between us remained unchanged.

「Hey, keep calling for me from now on, okay?」

「I was going to do it even without you telling me to. Stop

trying to order me around.」

Miyagi looked annoyed as she stood up and picked out a few manga books to read. When she sat back down, she took a sip from her soda.

What I learned from kissing Miyagi was that I liked her enough to go as far as barging into her house, summoning her at school, and even trying to order her around.

Surprisingly, I found myself quite taken by her.

Not that I had any intention of telling her that, though.

Volume 1 Extra

I Bet Sendai-san Doesn't Even Know My Name

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 34-extra

Despite it already being July, the sun's rays were nowhere to be seen.

I stopped in my tracks and glanced up at the sky. It had been a bit cloudy when I left home in the morning, giving the impression that rain might be approaching, though it also wouldn't have been surprising if it didn't happen. Despite the rainy season supposedly having ended, the current afternoon sky didn't seem to acknowledge the weather as summer yet.

I decided to take a detour on my way home because of the indecisive weather.

Even if I hurried home, there was no one there waiting for me anyway.

At home, all I'd be doing is passing the time in an empty house and having dinner by myself in a vacant kitchen.

There was no rush to get home, so I figured I'd enjoy a detour before heading back. However, it'd be an issue if it suddenly started raining while I was still out. I didn't have an umbrella with me, so I'd end up returning home soaked, and the thought of having to dry my uniform seemed like such a pain. Although I suspected nobody would fault me for skipping school tomorrow if my uniform didn't dry in time, the idea of spending an entire day alone at home didn't seem that appealing to me.

Is it going to rain or not?

As I made my way to the entrance of a bookstore, I peered up at the sky once more.

It seemed like the number of clouds was increasing, or maybe that was just my imagination. Regardless, I just wished for the sky to return to being clear and blue, although that appeared unlikely.

I had visited a bookstore recently with Maika, so there weren't any books I wanted to buy. However, this particular bookstore, which I'd been frequenting ever since I started high school, had a pretty good selection of books. It was the perfect place to kill time even if I didn't have any specific purchases in mind.

Gambling on the weather staying dry, I entered the bookstore and made my way to the manga section. I spotted a book with an interesting title, but I hesitated on whether or not to pick it up. To be honest, I would've preferred to buy it on a sunny day instead of a potentially rainy one like today. I moved to the novel section to browse the shelves before checking out the magazines. None of the magazines laid out on the counter seemed to catch my eye, but for some reason, I decided to turn my gaze over to my left.

「Oh.」

My voice slipped out.

I noticed a familiar face in the store.

We went to the same school and belonged to the same class.

I couldn't help but feel unlucky that I'd come across my classmate, Sendai-san, whom I'd never spoken to before.

I wasn't really interested in the flashy magazine she was staring at, but I still wanted to have a look around at the other magazines in this section, so I preferred to stay where I was. However, being in the vicinity of someone in the same school uniform as me made me feel uneasy. Sendai-san belonged to a much higher rank on the social hierarchy than me, so it would be awkward if we crossed paths. When I glanced over at her face again, I somehow felt pressured to leave.

I let out a small sigh.

It wasn't like Sendai-san was going to notice me anyway.

She had never noticed me before, so it wasn't like things were going to be any different today either. I mean, I highly doubted Sendai-san even remembered my name, let alone recognized my face.

It was like she and I lived on completely different planets.

It was painfully obvious when we were at school.

Our classmates were seemingly divided into color-coded groups, where those of the same color would flock together. These groups were further arranged into a social hierarchy to prevent colors of lower ranks from blending in. Naturally, Sendai-san and I belonged to different color groups.

That being said, in reality, we had the freedom to socialize with whomever we wanted to, so normally I would try not to view things that way. Yet, whenever it seemed like I was intruding on a space where I didn't belong, the atmosphere would turn awkward and leave me feeling uneasy.

Sendai-san didn't seem like the type of person who could pick up on that awkwardness, though.

I mean, she didn't have to. She had the freedom to visit any level on the hierarchy she wanted to and go wherever she pleased.

I highly doubted we'd ever see eye-to-eye with each other.

Before I left the magazine section, I snuck one last glance at Sendai-san.

She was staring at yet another flashy-looking magazine, wearing a troubled expression on her face. Come to think of it, she had the same look when she was examining the other magazine. At school, she always appeared so radiant and cheerful, so seeing her like this was a contrast to the image I had of her.

Either way, it didn't change the fact that she was the type to catch people's eyes.

She stood out even at school, although not as much as Ibaraki-san.

Maybe the reason why Sendai-san seemed so pretty was because she was wearing a little bit of makeup.

I turned my back to Sendai-san and left the magazine section. I went back to the manga aisle and contemplated buying the book I'd been hesitant about earlier. However, after finally deciding against it, I headed to the novel section again. I wandered around the bookstore, browsing different areas for a while, before eventually returning to the magazine section. Sendai-san didn't seem to be there anymore.

I didn't have any intention of following her around like a stalker, so I decided to head home and made my way to the exit.

However, when I saw Sendai-san fumbling around with her bag in front of the cash register, I stopped in my tracks.

What is she doing?

It was interesting watching her do something I'd normally never see her do at school.

Although I felt like it was a bad idea to approach the situation, when I heard her nervously trying to speak to the clerk, curiosity got the better of me, and I moved closer. The cash register displayed the cost of her books, but it seemed she hadn't paid yet. If I had to guess, she probably forgot to bring her wallet.

I felt a strange sense of closeness seeing her act so flustered.

I had way too much pocket money in my wallet, so paying for her purchase wasn't going to put me in financial straits or anything. But I found it interesting to watch Sendai-san, who was usually so calm and collected at school, deal with a troublesome situation like this. It'd make for an interesting sight if she were forced to leave the bookstore empty handed.

「These books—」

Sendai-san began to speak.

Suddenly, my mouth and body decided to move on their own.

「I'll pay for them.」

「Huh?」

Sendai-san sounded surprised as I approached her while taking out a five-thousand-yen bill from my wallet. I placed the money on the tray and said,

「Sendai-san, use this.」

I was doing this entirely on a whim. I didn't have any intention of holding it over her or seeking anything in return.

For some reason, with no deeper meaning to it, I had the urge to spend this five-thousand-yen bill on her. Perhaps it was because I wanted to help her out of a troublesome situation – one I wouldn't typically see her in. Or maybe I was just curious to see how she'd react to a stranger randomly offering to pay for her out of nowhere. I wasn't entirely sure of my own intentions, but in any case, since the money was already in my wallet, I decided I wanted to try doing something I usually wouldn't do.

Well, at least that was how I tried justifying it to myself.

「…… You're Miyagi, right?」

Huh, so she does remember my name.

I managed to hold back the words that nearly slipped out of my mouth. Sendai-san, who I never thought would utter my name, had such a surprised look on her face that it caught me off guard too, almost causing me to blurt out the thought that was just in my head.

「Use that money to pay for your things.」

「No, it's okay. I'll just feel bad if I do.」

「Don't worry about it.」

There was no deeper meaning behind my actions, so it didn't matter if she were to forget about this later. Spending any more time in front of the cash register was only going to draw attention to us. I didn't want anyone at school to approach me and question what I was doing with Sendai-san, so I wanted to get out of here as

soon as possible. However, Sendai-san wouldn't relent.

「No, take it back.」

She pulled the five-thousand-yen bill out of the tray and returned it to me. However, I had no intention of putting it back in my wallet, so I placed it right back onto the tray.

「Um, may I use this to complete your order?」

I heard a puzzled voice ask, so I answered with「Yes, please do」and the clerk took the bill from the tray. As Sendai-san was receiving her change from the clerk, I walked away from the cash register.

「Thanks, Miyagi. Looks like I forgot to bring my wallet, so you helped me out there.」

She said in her usual cheerful voice.

If you really feel grateful for the help, then you can return the favor by leaving me alone.

At school, Sendai-san and I belonged to two completely different aisles. I was someone who'd get sorted into the manga section, whereas Sendai-san aligned with the flashy and eye-catching magazine section. We were two distinct individuals existing in separate worlds, so to me, it seemed only logical for us to maintain our distance.

「Here, take your change. I'll pay back what I used tomorrow.」

「You don't have to pay me back. You can keep the change too.」

I didn't need the five-thousand yen.

Plus, if Maika saw Sendai-san handing me money at school, she'd just end up questioning me about it. The very idea of that seemed like such a pain.

I turned my back on Sendai-san and started walking away.

「Huh? Wait a second, I feel bad.」

「It's okay. I really don't need it, so you can have it, Sendai-san.」

「I can't just take this from you. Let me return it.」

「Just throw it away then.」

「Throw it away?! This is money we're talking about!」

Sendai-san grabbed me by the shoulder.

If you don't want it, then throw it away. Otherwise, just keep it.

I thought to myself, but Sendai-san didn't seem to be happy with either option and kept steering the conversation in a different direction on her own.

「Ahh, whatever. Let's just say I borrowed the change as well. I'll just give it all back to you tomorrow.」

「There's no need for that. You don't need to pay me back.」

I shook her hand off my shoulder and exited the bookstore.

「I'm going to pay you back. I'll give you five-thousand yen at school tomorrow.」

It seemed like she was chasing after me as I heard a somewhat annoyed tone – something I hadn't encountered at school before – coming from behind me. I felt like there were plenty of people out there who'd readily accept the money without any objections if I offered it, but she didn't seem to be that type of person.

She was surprisingly persistent.

And incredibly stubborn.

As I continued walking, I contemplated different ways to get Sendai-san to accept the money from me.

Was there anything I could do to convince – or even force her

to just take it?

As I considered a few ideas, my mind suddenly stopped on the silliest one.

「…… Then how about you work to pay off that five-thousand yen instead?」

I suggested without looking back at Sendai-san.

Money was frequently used as compensation for labor.

It was a bit of a boring suggestion, but one that made sense to me. My father worked and earned money. Even the money in my wallet was the result of my father spending all of his time out at work instead of being at home.

「Huh? Work?」

「For the time being, walk with me to my home.」

I stopped walking and turned to face Sendai-san.

「Huh? What do you mean walk with you to your house? I just said I'd pay you back tomorrow.」

「If you're not going to come with me, then just keep the money.」

It didn't matter to me whether or not she agreed to come over.

Either way, the five-thousand yen would ultimately end up in Sendai-san's possession.

End of story.

It was a bit boring having to walk home alone, but I turned my back towards her once again.

I heard a small sigh coming from behind me.

You should just stay where you are, Sendai-san.

Before setting off, I gazed up once again. The number of

clouds had increased since I entered the bookstore. The sky was now blanketed with gray clouds that hinted at an impending rain.

I should hurry home. I don't want my uniform to get wet.

I thought to myself as I heard a sigh that sounded even heavier than the last one coming from behind me.

「I've got some umbrellas at home.」

I wasn't sure if Sendai-san had an umbrella on her or not, but hearing her disheartened sigh made me say something unnecessary.

「Ahh, whatever. Where's your house? Is it close by?」

「It's not that far. Come with me.」

I replied as I started walking.

Sendai-san was actually following me.

I didn't even know what I wanted her to do for me.

I had no idea what was going through her mind either.

But maybe it was fine for something like this to happen every once in a while.

It wasn't like I had anything I wanted her to do for me in particular, but it was boring walking home alone. Having Sendai-san with me seemed like a great way to pass the time. While I doubted there'd be anything to talk about between us, considering we had absolutely nothing in common, it was a lot better than being by myself.

And so, we headed off to my apartment together in silence.

Chapter 11

I'm The One Who Gives the Orders, Not You, Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 35

My midterm exam results were a mess.

I was never a fan of studying, but I usually crammed right before exams, hoping to at least be able to memorize concepts like math formulas and historical events. Naturally, I attempted the same approach this time, but nothing seemed to stick in my memory.

Because of that, my grades – which weren't particularly high to begin with – plummeted.

Sendai-san was the reason behind all of this.

I couldn't concentrate on studying because of what had happened before our exams.

As June rolled in and we officially switched over to summer wear, Sendai-san, appearing more refreshed than ever, casually flipped through a magazine beside me. The cover featured flippant phrases like "tips for looking cute" or "how to lose weight". It looked a lot like the same type of magazine I had seen her purchase the first time I gave her five-thousand yen at the bookstore after she had forgotten her wallet.

I wasn't sure what to make of the situation.

After we shared those kisses, Sendai-san, who I hadn't even considered a friend, turned our relationship into something even more incomprehensible.

『It's only going to feel awkward for the first little while.』

Sendai-san was the one who said that, but she didn't seem awkward at all, even though this was the first time I'd called for her since then.

Maybe I shouldn't have summoned her.

I put the manga I was reading back onto my bookshelf and pulled out another book.

Nothing good happened today. Nothing bad happened either.

And yet, for some reason, I still called for Sendai-san.

I didn't want her to start thinking I stopped calling for her just because we kissed, and I thought I'd be able to act like nothing happened, but I was already starting to regret my decision.

I took a sip from my soda and leaned my back against my bed.

As usual, Sendai-san was sticking close to me.

Usually, she'd be lying on top of my bed, but today, she was sitting right next to me as if she belonged there.

「Do you like these kinds of magazines?」

Sendai-san, who was flipping through the pages so quickly I wasn't sure if she was actually reading them or not, raised her head and asked.

「No, I don't.」

「You've been staring over here for a while, so I thought maybe you were interested in it.」

「I wasn't staring at you, and I don't care for those types of magazines.」

I understood from the way her lips were curled that she was just trying to tease me, so I gave her a curt answer.

「I don't really like them either.」

「Even though you go out of your way to buy them and read

them? 」

「 Yep, I go out of my way to buy magazines that I don't even like. 」

She said as a matter-of-factly while closing the magazine.

I could understand why she wasn't reading through them thoroughly, but she refrained from telling me the reason why she bought them in the first place. However, considering who her friends were, I felt like I could hazard a guess.

The flashy catchphrases that adorned the covers seemed like the sort of words that Ibaraki-san liked.

People-pleasers sure had it rough.

If Sendai-san had acted that way around me, maybe I would have found it easier to be around her. However, I wouldn't have invited her to my house so many times if that were the case.

「 Oh right, how did your exams go? 」

Sendai-san asked while taking a sip from her barley tea.

I didn't want to admit that my scores weren't great.

But if I didn't say anything, then she'd end up assuming they were bad.

「 The same as usual. How about you, Sendai-san? 」

「 Same here. What was your average score? 」

「 Why do I have to tell you that? Besides, if you're going to ask someone that, then you should say what yours was first. 」

「 Sure, I don't mind. Pass me my bag. I brought the test papers we got back today with me. 」

Sendai-san said as she touched my arm.

Now that we were in our summer uniforms, our blouses became short-sleeved as well.

With no fabric shielding my arms, I could sense the warmth of her skin against mine. Even though I was closest to her bag, having her hand on me – which seemed to be her way of telling me to hurry up – made my body tense up.

How ridiculous.

I let out a small sigh as I pushed Sendai-san's hand away.

「I don't need to see it. I already know you got good marks.」

「They weren't that good. They're average.」

「Whatever you perceive as "average" is probably what I would consider really good.」

「That's not true. Come on, hand me my bag already.」

Sendai-san tapped me on the arm once again.

I doubted she even cared about our test scores.

She was probably getting a kick out of this simply because I said I didn't want to look at hers.

She was always up to these sorts of things.

I grabbed the magazine Sendai-san had on her lap and tossed it towards her bag.

「Go get it.」

And get your bag while you're at it.

「Yes, yes. That's an order, right?」

No matter how many times I had told her to answer with just one "yes", Sendai-san never listened to me. She rose from her seat, grabbing just the magazine, but she didn't hand it back to me.

「Hey, what if you tried wearing a hairstyle like this?」

Sendai-san flipped through the pages of the magazine and then

showed me a picture of a girl with loosely curled hair.

The hairstyle looked cute, but it didn't really suit me.

「Should I do it for you?」

As she extended her hand out towards me, a certain memory suddenly came to mind.

Right before we kissed, Sendai-san had lightly combed through my hair with her fingers.

Softly and gently.

Before her hands could even reach my hair, I shut her down by saying 「You don't have to.」

I wasn't sure if she was doing it deliberately or not, but Sendai-san was touching me a lot today.

I thought it was rather mean of her to do things like this – which she often did.

She was being mean to me on the day we kissed, too.

Even though I doubted she had feelings for me, she kept pushing me into issuing her those orders.

I didn't think she hated me, nor did I think she was making fun of me or anything, but I couldn't understand why Sendai-san was so insistent on kissing me.

However, one thing was clear: Sendai-san treated me kindly. I wanted to touch her too, and unlike the Sendai-san who always put on a front at school, I didn't dislike the real Sendai-san. Yet, it was frustrating for me to feel this way at all.

I stared at Sendai-san.

Her hair color was slightly brown, but it wasn't light enough for the teachers to care.

I could see her ears through her hair.

「You don't have any piercings, huh? Even though you look like the type to have them.」

Sendai-san's appearance wasn't exactly flashy, but it wouldn't have been strange to see her wearing earrings. Ibaraki-san's ears were pierced and she would often get scolded by the teachers.

「I wouldn't want the teachers to notice them. Are you ever going to get any piercings, Miyagi?」

「No.」

I answered curtly.

When I tugged at her earlobe – a spot where an earring wouldn't seem out of place – Sendai-san appeared slightly taken aback.

I ran my fingers behind her ear.

「Hey, that kind of tickles, you know.」

「Then stop moving around.」

Today, I wasn't going to let her order me around.

I'll follow my own desires and do as I please.

As I moved my index finger along the back of her ear, gently brushing against its base, Sendai-san grabbed onto my arm.

I'm The One Who Gives the Orders, Not You, Sendai-san (II)

Part 36

「Didn't I just say that tickles?」

Sendai-san didn't outright forbid me from touching her. However, her expression clearly conveyed that she didn't want to be touched, and she pulled my hand from her ear.

「And I thought I told you not to move.」

That hadn't been a request – it was an order.

Sendai-san probably knew that as well.

「Besides, all I did was touch your ear. Oh, don't tell me, is this another one of your weak spots?」

I tugged on her earlobe again.

「Stop pulling so hard. That hurts.」

Sendai-san didn't deny that it was her weak spot, but she furrowed her brows. However, her expression was the only thing that changed; she didn't move her body.

I slid my fingers behind her ear once again, causing her to tremble slightly.

The frown on her face didn't disappear, but unlike earlier, she didn't pull my hand away this time.

「That's good. Just keep on obeying my orders like this.」

I felt a sense of relief seeing Sendai-san doing exactly as I say.

This was my room. I shouldn't have to feel restless as if I were in someone else's room.

I was the owner of this place. Not Sendai-san.

My heart, which had been in turmoil up until now, started to calm down as our relationship gradually returned to how it used to be.

I continued to trace the outline of Sendai-san's ear with my finger.

The displeased look on her face did not disappear, as if it were frozen in place.

Wanting to wipe that expression away, I slipped my finger into her ear, prompting Sendai-san to flinch immediately.

「Hey!」

She exclaimed, but I kept poking around in her ear, as if trying to tickle her.

Sendai-san lifted her hand for a moment, but soon lowered it.

It seemed she was determined to follow the previous order I had issued her, so she stopped resisting. I took the opportunity to continue playing around with her ear.

Sendai-san always appeared so calm at school, so it was amusing to see her bear with this in silence despite her annoyance.

The things that I found amusing were probably uninteresting to Sendai-san, and I'm sure it was the same vice versa.

Needless to say, it was clear that the two of us were polar opposites with nothing in common. It was only natural that I couldn't understand someone as dazzling and outstanding as Sendai-san.

I ran my fingers from the top of her ear down to the side of her neck.

Sendai-san flinched.

「Is this amusing to you?」

She asked in a subdued voice as she grabbed onto my arm, as if unable to bear with it any longer.

「Yep. Feel free to resist all you want.」

Sendai-san threw a defiant glare at me.

There – that face was what suited her best.

Seeing the angry challenge in her eyes, I felt like I might not be able to hold back.

「Can you just cut it out already?」

「Nope.」

I rejected Sendai-san's request with a single word and shook her hand off. Then, I tugged on her ear to pull her body towards me.

「Miyagi, that hurts!」

Of course it does.

Her reaction was fitting, considering I was intentionally pulling on her ear with enough force to cause discomfort and pain.

Feeling content with what I did, I closed the distance between us a bit more.

Sendai-san was now about as close as when we kissed.

Thump.

For some reason, my heart was misconstruing the emotions I held for Sendai-san as something positive.

Pretending not to notice my rapidly increasing heart rate, I pressed my lips to her ear.

A sweet, floral fragrance gently tickled my nose.

It was the same scent that always lingered on my pillow after Sendai-san's visits – a scent I didn't particularly dislike.

What kind of shampoo does she use?

While my mind was getting distracted by the question that I had contemplated several times before, I gently touched her ear with the tip of my tongue.

「Hey, I told you that tickles!」

Sendai-san exclaimed as she pushed me by the shoulders.

That being said, it seemed she was still keeping the order I had issued earlier in mind, so she didn't use too much strength.

When I gently bit down on the cartilage of her ear, Sendai-san trembled, her reaction seeming overly dramatic.

「Isn't this enough already?」

She didn't sound angry, but she spoke in a lower tone than usual.

「No.」

「What do you mean "no"? I'm telling you to stop.」

「Senda—」

I whispered into her ear, but stopped myself partway.

Then, I rephrased what I was about to say.

「Shut up, Hazuki.」

In this room, Sendai-san had once called me by my given name before, so I wanted to get my revenge.

There was no deeper meaning to it.

The only connection we had between us was the agreement we made. Our relationship consisted of nothing more and nothing less. That had been decided from the moment I first handed her a five-thousand-yen bill. Our time together was limited – the contract that linked us was born on a whim, so it was sure to end the same

way.

At most, we would only stay together until graduation.

It wouldn't extend beyond that.

I was satisfied with what we had.

I didn't wish for anything more.

So calling her by her first name didn't feel all that special to me.

I pressed my lips against the bottom of her ear.

Sendai-san briefly touched my back with her hand before quickly pulling it away.

As I stroked her smooth skin with my tongue, I heard a soft exhale. Her breath lightly tickled against my neck, prompting me to retaliate by running my tongue behind her ear.

「That feels disgusting, Miyagi.」

Her voice retained its usual tone, but her breathing was starting to sound a bit labored. I could feel my own heart racing a bit faster as well.

I shouldn't go any further than this.

I attempted to rationalize with myself, but I couldn't help getting swept away by the quickening rhythm of my heartbeat, a sound I was struggling to ignore.

I shifted the weight of my body onto Sendai-san as I pushed her down.

I was surprised by how easily her back touched the floor. I tried to bite on her ear once again, but this time, she forcefully shoved me away.

「If you go any further than this, you'll be breaking the rules.」

「I don’t think I’m breaking any rules though.」

I complained, backing away slightly.

Sendai-san pushed me aside as she sat herself up.

「What you were doing was practically a violation.」

「Wait, are you trying to tell me you were actually feeling pleasured by all of that?」

I asked mockingly.

Wiping her ear, Sendai-san stood up with an annoyed expression on her face.

「Don’t be stupid. I’m just telling you not to push me down like that.」

She said as she kicked my thigh without holding back.

「Hey, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san said as she flopped onto my bed.

「What?」

「If you want, you can keep calling me by my first name.」

「I’m not calling you that anymore.」

I answered as I leaned my back against the bed.

She hit me with a pillow in response. Although it didn’t actually hurt, I exaggerated my reaction and exclaimed, “Hey, that hurts!” But instead of receiving an apology, she hit me with the pillow once more.

「You’re so boring, Miyagi.」

The soft, murmuring voice truly did sound bored.

I'm The One Who Gives the Orders, Not You, Sendai-san (III)

Part 37

The history of the world was written on the blackboard, and as usual, Tigerhashi was dressed in his distinctive blue attire. I wasn't interested in listening to his lecture about the ancient rise and fall of distant nations, so his words were going in one ear and out the other.

Things hardly ever went the way I wanted them to.

Even when I issued orders intended to annoy Sendai-san, her irritation usually faded quickly, leaving me as the only one with unstable, wavering emotions that felt like they could vanish into thin air at any moment.

That wasn't the kind of result I wanted.

I turned to the next page of my textbook.

Sendai-san's breath.

Her sweet fragrance.

The sensation of her soft ear and solid bone.

Finally, the faint blush on her cheeks.

I couldn't help but fill my mind with the events of yesterday.

I found myself unable to lock the memories of what happened yesterday away in a mental compartment. Because of that, my mind was now hopelessly filled with thoughts of Sendai-san.

This is strange.

I had done numerous things of similar nature to her in the past.

I had given her hickeys and bitten her neck before. What I did yesterday wasn't much different.

Yet, the memory of it lingered in my head, growing more vivid by the second.

That was all I could think about lately.

Whenever Sendai-san was involved, nothing good ever seemed to come from it. Despite our arrangement beginning on a whim, our relationship had started to feel considerably heavy recently.

I pulled the eraser that Sendai-san left behind in my room the other day out of my pencil case.

The eraser that had been passed back and forth between us showed no signs of use.

It wasn't the sort of object that required anyone to go out of their way to return.

Had Sendai-san not summoned me at school the other day, our connection might've ended then and there. We wouldn't have ended up kissing, and my mind wouldn't be so preoccupied with her when I should be concentrating on class.

「Hey, don't space out! Keep your eyes over here.」

Tigerhashi's words sounded as if they were aimed at me, causing me to apprehensively raise my head. However, it turned out that the one being scolded was actually a boy sitting three rows ahead of me, who'd also been asked to answer a rather challenging question.

Oh, it's not me today.

Having escaped Tigerhashi's wrath today, I pulled out another eraser from my pencil case and started erasing some of the writing on my notebook to look busy, even though there wasn't anything that really needed to be erased.

Meanwhile, the difficult question Tigerhashi had posed to the boy remained unanswered.

I rewrote what I'd erased earlier, copying what was written on the blackboard. Then, I put the eraser that Sendai-san returned to me back into my pencil case.

As the school day neared its end, the number of Tigerhashi's targets increased, but miraculously, I managed to avoid becoming one of them today.

As soon as homeroom ended, Maika came over to my desk.

「Man, the weather forecast just had to be wrong today of all days, huh. I was really hoping that our sports festival practice would be cancelled.」

She said with a disappointed tone in her voice.

「I thought it'd be cancelled too. These joint training sessions are such a pain.」

Although the morning news had advised us to bring umbrellas, there was no rain outside, despite the overcast sky.

「Did they really have to make us do it after school? Couldn't they have just replaced a class with it instead?」

Ami grumbled, casting a glare at the unyielding dry sky, while voicing her annoyance about having to participate in a joint training session for the upcoming sports festival.

"I just wanna go home already," she added.

「Well, it's not going to get cancelled no matter how much we complain about it, so we should head out before a teacher gets mad at us.」

「Yeah, I guess you're right.」

I agreed, reluctantly resigning myself to Maika's suggestion. Rising from my chair, I took my gym bag and joined them as the three of us exited the classroom together. As we walked down the hallway, Ami occasionally muttered phrases like, "I don't wanna go," and Maika would share the sentiment.

However, despite her complaints, the weather remained unchanged, and we headed for the sports field.

The school field, which was typically quite spacious, felt unusually cramped today due to the joint training session we were partaking in. Yet, somehow I managed to spot Sendai-san in the crowd without even searching for her.

Her class didn't seem to be lined up yet.

However, considering that we were arranged by grade and class, it was practically inevitable that I'd eventually notice her since she belonged to the neighboring class. Likewise, spotting Ibaraki-san, who was standing beside her, was also unavoidable.

Sendai-san was eye-catching, yet Ibaraki-san managed to stand out even more.

Her distinctly dyed brown hair and noticeably disheveled gym uniform were impossible to overlook.

Adorned with multiple piercings and meticulously manicured nails, she exuded an air of invincibility at school. She was always accompanied by a group of friends who appeared to share her style and demeanor, creating an impression that they belonged to an entirely different world from the rest of us.

However, as I observed Ibaraki-san, who appeared to be having a good time conversing with some guy, I couldn't help but feel that she and Sendai-san were an unlikely match.

I had no idea why those two even hung out together.

Back when I was just watching them from afar, the two of them seemed like friends that had a lot in common, but my impression has changed since then.

Sendai-san didn't seem to share the same interests as Ibaraki-san.

「Hey, Shiori, what are you daydreaming about over there?」

「Huh? Oh, I was just thinking about how nice it'd be if we could finish up quickly.」

Maika tapped me on the shoulder, and I looked away from Sendai-san.

「Finish up? If only. We haven't even started yet. Oh, hey, is that Ibaraki-san over there? I thought she usually skipped these kinds of things.」

「Maybe she's worried it'll affect her school record?」

Ami said with a giggle.

「You think she's worried about it now?」

Maika asked with a hint of curiosity in her voice.

「Better late than never, right?」

「Well, I guess that's true. Oh, right, Shiori. Has anything else happened between you and Sendai-san since then?」

Maika asked, her voice filled with anticipation, as she shifted her gaze from Ibaraki-san to Sendai-san. Ami chimed in with, "I wanna know too!" as she grabbed hold of my arm.

The other day, Sendai-san had come to our classroom and looked for me.

That incident had been quite a shock for Maika and Ami. Since then, they would always bring up Sendai-san in our conversations. Basically, Sendai-san – who had gone out of her way to look for me at school – had piqued their curiosity.

I tried to fend them off by coming up with what I thought was a reasonable excuse, but the fact that they kept bugging me about her meant they weren't convinced.

Judging by the looks on their faces, it was obvious that they were hoping to hear something more dramatic.

I couldn't help but sigh.

「What do you mean?」

「Come on, you know exactly what I'm asking.」

Maika replied, as if it was obvious that something had happened.

「No way. Besides, it's not like either of us have anything to do with each other.」

「Hmm, really now?」

Hearing Maika sound so certain in her words made my heart feel a little heavy.

But only a little.

It really wasn't that big of a deal or anything.

「Honestly, it would've been great if we could just wing the sports festival without having to practice for anything.」

Maika grumbled as she crouched on the ground, seemingly having lost interest in talking about Sendai-san.

「Right? They should've just cancelled practice today even if it's not raining.」

I replied as I glanced over at Sendai-san again.

I didn't know what they were talking about, but she and Ibaraki-san were sharing a laugh over something.

I should've expected it, but she never looked my way even once.

Ever since we became third years, I've found it increasingly difficult to manage the emotions I have towards Sendai-san.

I had always believed that my feelings were going along at a leisurely pace, but before I knew it, they had accelerated to full speed, to the point where I was afraid I would crash into something. It felt like my sense of reason had been tossed aside and rendered useless.

I needed to let go of these feelings towards Sendai-san.

Otherwise, our relationship might end up becoming even more complicated. I knew what I needed to do. I knew it perfectly well, and yet, a part of me wanted to continue giving her orders forever.

I wanted her to listen to me.

To obey me.

To submit to me.

—— This is so stupid.

I gazed up at the sky.

The first time I gave Sendai-san five thousand yen at the bookstore, the sky looked just as indecisive as it did now.

At the time, the rainy season had just ended, so it's almost been a year since then.

What had I been doing at this time last year?

I tried to recall, but my memory was hazy.

「Hey, it's time for us to line up.」

Maika said as she poked me on the back, snapping me out of my daydream.

Well, if there was one thing I did remember, it was that last year's sports festival was pretty dull.

Maika SS 2

Utsunomiya Maika's After School Hours

(Maika PoV)
Part 37-extra

「Well then, let's begin our three hundred twenty-seventh meeting to look for clues on what Shiori and Sendai-san could have to do with each other.」

Ami declared, clapping her hands together with a serious look on her face before taking a sip from her cola. We were sitting at a table in the corner of a fast food restaurant, a popular spot for students to gather after school.

「What do you mean three hundred twenty-seventh? Isn't this only our second time?」

I asked Ami, who was sitting across from me, as I picked up a few fries in my hand.

Even though Shiori wasn't here with us after school right now, Ami was acting the same as ever—lively, cheerful, and bright.

「Well, you know how it is. The bigger the number, the better, right? Anyway, what are your thoughts, Maika?」

「On what?」

「What do you think is the connection between Shiori and Sendai-san? Doesn't it seem like there's something going on between them?」

「… Something going on between them, huh.」

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious.

Earlier today, when we were getting ready for our joint training session for the sports festival, I decided to try asking Shiori,

“Has anything else happened between you and Sendai-san since then?”

I was just that curious after seeing Sendai-san come by our classroom, asking to see Shiori back before our midterms began.

I had heard that the reason why Sendai-san came to our classroom was because one of our teachers needed to see Shiori for something, and that they’d never spoken to each other before and she’d had no subsequent contact with Sendai-san after that.

「Isn’t it like Shiori says?」

I answered Ami’s question with the same thing I’d said many times before.

What Shiori described were fairly ordinary situations, so I didn’t have much reason to doubt her. Though there were a few things that didn’t seem to add up.

I ate some of the fries in my hand and offered some to Ami.

「Don’t mind if I do.」

She said, taking a few fries. After popping them in her mouth, she gave a thoughtful hum, then shot me a mischievous grin.

「You’re probably right, but wouldn’t it be more interesting if there was something between them?」

Ami began listing off a few absurd, impossible scenarios.

For example, perhaps Shiori was being extorted by Sendai-san for money, or maybe Shiori had some dirt on Sendai-san and was using it to blackmail her.

After going through all her wild speculations, Ami mumbled, “But I guess that’s not possible, huh.”

「Well, looks like there’s no way Sendai-san and Shiori have anything to do with each other after all.」

Ami said with a resigned tone in her voice as she gulped down her cola.

「Yeah, I guess not. But more importantly, I'm actually kind of concerned about Shiori. It feels like she's not totally herself lately.」

Instead of continuing with our speculations, I decided to bring up something that was right in front of our eyes.

When I saw Shiori during spring break, she looked a little down. She was never the type to be constantly full of energy, but she also didn't seem like someone with emotional highs and lows either, so this lack of energy suggested something might've happened.

It seemed better to focus on what we could actually see than to get wrapped up in wild theories.

「Yeah, that's true.」

Ami said, nodding with a serious look on her face.

Feeling Shiori's absence, Ami started tapping her fingertips against the table, the rhythm audible even against the constant hum of background noise. After a few moments, she spoke up.

「Shiori's always been a bit absentminded, but lately, she's been more spaced out than usual. I just wish she'd tell us if something was bothering her.」

「Shiori hardly ever confides in us about her worries, though.」

I replied, sipping my iced tea as her face flashed through my mind.

She might seem talkative, but in truth, she was fairly reserved.

She could chat endlessly about manga or anime, complain about studying or how hard it was to deal with Tigerhashi, but she never really opened up about personal things like love or her plans for the future. It felt like she rarely ever wanted to talk about herself.

「… Hey, Maika. What if Shiori just doesn't trust us?」

Ami brought up the one possibility I'd been hoping wouldn't come up. Though she didn't seem entirely serious, I couldn't help but think that given the situation, maybe it wasn't so far off.

「Don't say that. Just thinking about it makes me sad.」

「I mean, Shiori hasn't been spending time with us much lately. It's like I don't even know her anymore. Let's mourn her memory together.」

Ami said with an overly dramatic tone, pretending to shed tears.

Ami's habit of going overboard was part of her charm, though it could be a bit much at times—but what she said was something that had been on my mind, too.

Since our first year, I'd always invited Shiori to hang out after school, and that routine hadn't changed even now in our third year. But today, she'd turned me down, and now that I thought about it, she'd been like this since last year. Ever since the summer of our second year, Shiori had been hanging out with us less and less, and every time I asked why, her answers were always so vague.

At first, I didn't think it was worth worrying about, but lately, Shiori didn't seem like herself, and it made me wonder if something was actually going on. I wanted to bring it up, but with exams around the corner and my own cram school classes, we'd hardly had the chance to hang out—let alone talk about something serious.

「This really is depressing to think about.」

I sighed, picking up a few more fries, but instead of eating them myself, I held them up to Ami's mouth, where they promptly disappeared.

「Thanks.」

Munching thoughtfully, Ami continued, "Okay, on a more serious note, some things are just hard to talk about, you know?"

「Like what?」

「Like when someone says they gained two kilograms, but they've really gained three.」

「Uh, didn't you say that exact thing about your weight the other day, Ami?」

「Yep.」

「Then it's clearly not hard to talk about if you just told me about it. Wait, did you really put on three kilograms? No wonder you're packing it in around here.」

I reached out and gently tugged on Ami's cheek.

「Oh nooo! Please stop!」

Her voice echoed over the already loud restaurant buzz, and I quickly let go.

「That was a little too loud, Ami.」

「Oops, sorry!」

Ami clasped her hands and gave a little bow in apology.

Without Shiori here, things felt a bit emptier. But it wasn't as if I could just force her to hang out.

「Guess all we can really do is wait and hope she'll open up to us eventually.」

I took a sip of my iced tea, uncertain if that day would come.

Chapter 12

I'm Just Doing Whatever You Tell Me To, Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)

Part 38

Something's about to change.

Or at least, that was what I had thought when Miyagi toyed with my ear the other day.

Even though Miyagi had called me over several times after our midterms, our dynamic remained largely unchanged. The sports festival came and went in the blink of an eye, and we were now spending our days together in peace.

She hadn't been put off by the kiss we shared, and she hadn't stopped summoning me since the day she bit my ear either.

How boring.

This wasn't fun at all.

It was disconcerting just how bored I felt over the lack of change.

Spending time in this room now felt like when a beloved restaurant changes its tastes. I didn't think sharing a kiss was going to change anything between us, but perhaps deep down, I wanted it to.

Well, even if there were changes between us, there was no guarantee that they would be for the better. However, the way Miyagi was acting right now was way too dull. Nowadays, she only ever gave me mundane orders.

I felt deflated.

Things weren't as exciting anymore.

The other day, Miyagi had licked my ear.

I wasn't exactly pleased with her actions, but I was curious about what was going through her head. However, I didn't bother asking about it at the time, so her behavior remained a mystery.

Since then, Miyagi had stopped issuing me orders to lick her fingers or her feet. It wasn't like I wanted her to give me those types of suggestive orders, but I was getting tired of doing her homework and reading manga to her.

Ah, well…

I guess there were a couple of subtle changes.

The table had gotten a little bigger, and Miyagi was sitting a bit closer to me than usual.

There was more space for us to place our textbooks now.

Maybe that was why Miyagi was doing her homework next to me today.

However, it appeared she was determined to avoid any physical contact with me. Moreover, she didn't seem to be enjoying herself all that much either.

Miyagi seemed gloomy, much like the erratic weather during the rainy season.

「You made a mistake there.」

I pointed at a section on Miyagi's notebook with my pencil.

English appeared to be one of her weaker subjects, as evidenced by the other mistakes in her homework, but I chose to address only one of them for now. However, Miyagi stared at me in response with an unimpressed look on her face.

「I didn't ask, so I don't need you pointing out my mistakes.」

「Well, are you just going to leave it as it is then?」

「… No.」

Miyagi furrowed her brows as she erased the letters written on her notebook. The eraser she was using looked new, unlike the one I returned to her.

—— It was a little insulting knowing she went out of her way to buy and use a new eraser.

I shifted my focus back to my own notebook.

「So then, what's the right answer?」

Miyagi, who had been doing her own homework diligently up until now, was now demanding me to help her take the easy way out.

「Think it through yourself.」

「I don't know how to.」

「I'm sure you can work out the answer if you tried. Do it properly.」

「Fine, then I'll make it an order. Tell me the answer.」

She said as she pushed her textbook and notebook towards me.

「You're not actually asking me to tell you the answer. You just want me to do it for you, right?」

「Yep, exactly.」

「Sure, sure.」

If I remembered correctly, this happened last time as well. She gave up on her homework halfway and left the rest to me so she could go read manga.

I took Miyagi's notebook from her, as well as her eraser.

The question itself wasn't that difficult.

I'm pretty sure that if she put in the effort, even someone like Miyagi would be able to answer it correctly. But there was no point thinking about it. I was given an order, so I had no choice but to obey. I erased her mistakes off the page and began writing over them.

「It's almost been a year, huh?」

I mentioned casually as I finished correcting her mistakes and moved onto the next question.

「Since what?」

「Since I started coming here.」

「Is that so?」

Miyagi replied, sounding uninterested.

「The first time we hung out was around July, right? So it's almost been a year already.」

Even though we were classmates at the time, Miyagi and I had hardly ever spoken to each other. Nevertheless, I could vividly recall what led me to start coming over to her place.

Miyagi had saved my life on that fateful day when I'd forgotten to bring my wallet, generously offering to pay for my purchase! … Yeah, right. If things had actually gone down that way, it would make for quite the fairytale. In reality, she had forced the money upon me and refused to let me pay her back. She even went as far as suggesting I throw the change away if I didn't want it.

At the time, I thought of Miyagi as a real pain in the side. Honestly, even now, my impression of her hasn't changed.

「Why did you pay for my books back then?」

「I simply wanted to help out a fellow classmate in need.」

「Really now?」

「No, that's a lie. I just happened to have a five-thousand-yen bill in my wallet at the time.」

「So what you're saying is, if you only had one-thousand yen on you, you wouldn't have helped out?」

「Maybe.」

「You're lying about that too, aren't you? What's the real reason?」

「I just felt like it. That's all.」

I wasn't sure if she was telling the truth or not, but Miyagi didn't seem interested in continuing the conversation. She stood up and walked over to the bookshelf, picking out two volumes of manga before lying down on her bed.

I quickly finished up the rest of Miyagi's homework and started poking her in the side.

「Hey, move over a bit.」

「Why?」

「That's my spot.」

「This is my bed, you know. Don't come over here. There's not enough space for you.」

Miyagi said curtly as she adjusted herself towards the middle of the bed.

Well, it was true that the bed belonged to Miyagi, and not me.

But I was always the one on her bed whenever I came over, so I felt like I had the right to at least half of it.

「Come on, it's fine, isn't it? Just move over a little.」

「It's not fine.」

「You're so stingy, Miyagi.」

Instead of continuing to poke her in the side, I decided to push her, determined to stake my claim. However, without touching me back, Miyagi replied with,

「Stop it. You're being really annoying, Sendai-san.」

Even though Miyagi was sometimes surprisingly bold in the way she touched me, there were moments when she seemed uneasy about doing so. Whenever that happened, there'd be this look on her face that made it seem like she regretted touching me at all.

I wasn't the type of person who could brush everything off with a smile. I had a bit of a delicate side to me, so even I had my limits and could get hurt by other people's words. There were moments when Miyagi's insensitivity would cut really deep.

I generally didn't mind being touched by Miyagi.

But lately, I was starting to feel increasingly uncomfortable about it.

If I had to choose, I'd much rather touch her than to be touched by her.

I climbed onto her bed and tried to push Miyagi aside to make room for myself. However, instead of yielding, she sat herself up.

「Sendai-san, take off your necktie.」

She said out of nowhere as she stared blankly at me.

Seeing that look on her face wasn't a good sign.

Knowing Miyagi, she was probably about to get me to do something unpleasant.

「Why?」

「Just do it.」

Like always, whenever she refused to answer my questions, it was her way of telling me it was an order. Instead of pointlessly

fighting back, I did what I was told and took off my necktie.

「Is this good enough?」

「Yep. Now, hand it over to me.」

「My necktie?」

「Yes, your necktie.」

The tone in Miyagi's voice sounded the same as when she had ordered me to do her homework earlier, but still, I had a bad feeling about this. Despite that, I handed my necktie over to her.

「Turn around.」

I did exactly as I was told and turned around. Miyagi followed up with, "Give me your hands," as she grabbed both of my wrists.

I could guess what she was about to do from here.

I sighed, though not loud enough for Miyagi to hear, as she pulled my hands towards her. Suddenly, I felt the sensation of cloth tightly wrapping around my wrists.

「Hey, that hurts!」

I exclaimed. My wrists were bound together so tightly, it felt like she'd poured all her strength into tying them.

If she didn't loosen the necktie up a bit, it was definitely going to leave a mark. Our summer uniforms were short-sleeved, so it'd end up being visible to everyone.

「Miyagi.」

When I sternly called out her name, the necktie dug into my wrists even further.

「You better not leave any marks behind.」

As soon as I reprimanded her, the necktie loosened slightly. Then, I felt her finishing the knot up.

「You're such a pervert, Miyagi. I bet you got this idea from reading a manga, didn't you?」

Her bookshelf was filled with books from various genres, spanning from adorable shoujo manga to spirited shounen manga. Among them, there were a few erotic books too, so it wouldn't be surprising if one of those stories included a situation where the main heroine found herself getting tied up with a necktie by her domineering boyfriend.

「Oh, were you hoping that I would imitate one of those kinds of stories?」

「As if.」

「Well, I wasn't going to anyway. Now, stay seated like that by yourself for about an hour.」

「Huh? What? Why? Is this supposed to be neglect play or something?」

「So you did want me to do something to you.」

She said from behind me, using my own words against me.

「You're quite the pervert, Sendai-san.」

I could feel her breath against my neck. Suddenly, she sank her teeth into my shoulder.

「Ow!」

The word "moderation" clearly did not exist in Miyagi's dictionary.

Even when I expressed my pain, her teeth continued to dig into my shoulder.

「I never said I wanted this.」

Usually, I'd be able to relieve myself of the pain by pushing Miyagi away by the forehead. But I couldn't do that today since I had my wrists bound together. I felt like if I turned around now, I'd

only end up losing my balance, so all I could do was voice my protests aloud.

「Miyagi, that seriously hurts.」

When I called out her name firmly, she finally relented.

「I thought we agreed not to do anything that would leave any marks. I don't mind if you bite me, but at least be a bit gentler.」

「No one would be able to see a mark on your shoulder anyway, so it's fine, isn't it?」

「That's not the issue here.」

「Fine, then get off the bed and sit on the floor.」

"I don't want to."

At least, that's what I'd like to say, but even if I did, I'm sure Miyagi would force me off the bed somehow. Unlike normal, reasonable people, Miyagi didn't seem to have any reservations about shoving people away.

And for me, I'd much rather get off the bed on my own than to get kicked off it.

I silently did exactly as I was told and sat on the floor. As soon as I did, Miyagi took off her socks.

「Sendai-san, you know what I'm about to order you to do, right?」

I looked up to meet her gaze.

In response, Miyagi kicked me on the shoulder, right where she'd bitten me earlier.

I'm Just Doing Whatever You Tell Me To, Miyagi (II)

Part 39

「You want me to lick your foot, right?」

I'd been hanging around Miyagi for a while now, so compared to before, I was a bit better at reading her now.

「If you already know, then hurry up and get to it.」

Miyagi sounded amused as she looked down at me. While I did prefer seeing her in a good mood rather than having her look sulky all the time, I really wasn't having it right now.

The reason for that was because I knew things were only about to go downhill from here. Whenever Miyagi appeared to be in a good mood, it had never resulted in anything positive for me.

「Fine. Can you lift your leg up a bit then?」

It was inconvenient not being able to use my hands. I couldn't hold her leg up the way I usually did.

I stared at Miyagi's leg as I remained seated on the floor.

I had no complaints about licking her foot.

I had done it many times before in the past.

However, licking her foot with my hands still bound together seemed like a tall task.

「No.」

Her answer was short and blunt.

She's not even going to cooperate with me? How rude.

She wanted me to obey her order while I was still tied up.

Left with no other choice, I put my tongue on the area just below her knee.

I mean, her knee was close enough to her foot anyway.

However, Miyagi didn't seem to be impressed.

「Start with my toes.」

She said, her voice coming from above me.

「With my hands still bound together?」

「Yep, with your hands still bound together. After all, you enjoy doing whatever I tell you to, don't you, Sendai-san?」

Actually, I don't like obeying your orders at all.

But it would be pointless if I said it aloud, so I kept the thought to myself. Plus, I had no choice but to obey her. It was either that or I return the five-thousand yen to her and never set foot in her room again.

I looked up at Miyagi from the floor.

She didn't seem like she was going to budge at all.

In order to fulfill her demand, I was the one who needed to do all the work.

The owner of this room was incredibly selfish. Unreservedly so. And I was the only person she treated this way.

She'd say things to me that she wouldn't dare utter in front of other people. Yet, the craziest thing about all of this wasn't her behavior, but rather the fact that I continued to obey every last one of her orders.

「Sendai-san.」

She kicked my knee, as if urging me to get to it. I gradually shifted my gaze away from Miyagi and began to lick her toes. With

how low her foot dangled, it almost felt like I was licking the floor.

'How humiliating,' I thought, as if it were someone else's problem.

「Now this is what I like seeing from you, Sendai-san.」

Hearing the joy in her voice was starting to get on my nerves.

I wasn't in a posture that was easy to maintain. In fact, it was beginning to hurt. However, I couldn't bring myself to make the active choice of returning the five-thousand yen to her, so I licked her toes and made my way up to the insole of her foot. By the time I reached her ankle, she pulled her leg away slightly. I followed it, almost as if I were chasing her foot down. Just as my tongue met the top of her foot again, she pushed it towards me.

No doubt, she was amused by all this.

「Miyagi.」

Instead of voicing my complaints, I simply called out her name.

Seemingly displeased with me doing so, Miyagi slid her foot underneath my chin and lifted it up with her instep.

「What?」

Miyagi asked with a grin on her face.

「Stop moving so much.」

「Remember, I'm the only one who can issue orders. You don't have that right, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi's not wrong.

But do I really have to take orders from her while looking like this?

Although I was the one who willingly went along with it, I felt incredibly displeased with the current situation.

「Hurry up and continue already.」

Miyagi gave the next order before I could even speak my mind.

She placed her foot back on the floor. Then, I pressed my lips against the top of her foot once again.

She gave the orders, and I obeyed them.

It had become so routine that despite my frustration, my body acted on its own.

I licked her toes, brushing against her smooth skin with my lips.

As I bit down gently on her ankle – tracing the faint outline of the bone beneath my tongue – Miyagi's body shifted ever so slightly. I continued to move my tongue along her leg, reaching up to her shin, while biting her in different places repeatedly.

I licked her, bit her, and then touched her knee with my lips.

I couldn't help but imagine that the skin beneath my mouth were her lips.

I softly pressed my lips against her knee, the same way as when I kissed her.

After repeating this a few times, I sucked on it with as much intensity as I could, prompting Miyagi to grab me by my hair.

「That's enough.」

「Why?」

「Because you're being lewd, Sendai-san.」

「Oh, come on. What's that supposed to mean?」

「It just feels disgusting.」

Miyagi said without a trace of emotion in her voice as she let go of my hair.

Then, instead of gently nibbling her skin, I decided to sink my teeth firmly into her knee, ensuring enough pressure to leave distinct bite marks behind. I reached her bone almost instantly, but I didn't care. As I dug my teeth further into her flesh, she forcefully pushed my head away.

「Quit it. That really hurts.」

「Well, you know, since you told me I was being too lewd, I thought I'd tone it down a little.」

「Don't do anything I didn't order you to do.」

「Huh? But I was licking your foot, just like you told me to.」

「Okay, fine. You don't have to do it anymore.」

Though she didn't outright declare it as the end of her order, I could discern the curt tone in her voice. Nevertheless, my bound hands remained unreleased.

「Well, in that case, can you untie me now?」

「How about you just stay like that forever?」

「I won't even be able to go home like this.」

Miyagi's orders were not allowed to interfere with the rest of my day.

Our arrangement dictated that my time belonged to Miyagi, and I would follow all of Miyagi's orders during the few hours we were together, so there was no valid reason for her to deny my request. Yet, for some reason, Miyagi chose not to untie me.

「That's fine. You don't need to go home anyway. How about you just let me keep you around like this? If you're concerned about food, then I'll gladly feed you.」

Miyagi didn't sound like she was joking at all.

「Stop spouting nonsense and just untie me already.」

「If you want me to untie you, then how about you try asking nicely?」

Even though her jokes weren't very funny, it was hard to just brush them off.

Miyagi kicked my knee, as if telling me to hurry up.

I couldn't discern the emotions behind the eyes that gazed down upon me.

I bowed my head as if pleading for mercy.

I knew exactly what I needed to say to get her to free me. Yet, I couldn't bring myself to beg Miyagi to untie me. I found her current attitude a bit – no, incredibly repulsive.

「What? Do you want to stay like that forever?」

As if to make it clear that she wasn't going to remove my necktie until I begged for it, she grabbed me by the collar of my blouse. She wasn't using all her strength, but she pulled me closer to herself, as if she were dragging me towards her.

I shot a glare at Miyagi, who I felt was being a little violent.

「Now you're going too far. Let me go.」

When I firmly stood my ground, Miyagi let go of my collar as if she'd suddenly lost all interest, causing me to lose my balance. I didn't fall over, but her complete lack of consideration made me want to complain even more. However, before I could get a word in, Miyagi asked me a question.

「Sendai-san, what is it that you want from me?」

「What do you mean?」

「I was just wondering if there was something you wanted me to order you to do.」

「Huh? No way. Absolutely not.」

I didn't come to her place because I wanted to get ordered

around.

That being said, I wasn't here for the money either. But I also didn't have anything I wanted from Miyagi.

「Then how far are you willing to let me go?」

Her words were somewhat indirect, but I immediately understood that she was asking about the extent to which I would tolerate her orders.

You've been acting as you please up until now. What's the point in asking about this now?

I had no clue why she was bringing it up, but it didn't seem like the type of question she should be asking after nearly a year.

「How far I'm willing to let you go? Well, you can start by giving me orders that remain within the boundaries of common sense.」

「Does that mean you consider the orders I gave you today as things that "remain within the boundaries of common sense"?」

She tied me up and forced me to lick her foot as if I were licking the floor.

Even now, my hands were still bound together.

I may have done exactly as I was told, but that didn't mean I considered all of that "common sense".

「I mean, you didn't refuse, so that means you do consider them within the boundaries of common sense, right?」

I obeyed every last one of Miyagi's orders.

That, in itself, fell outside the boundaries of common sense.

I would never act like this with anyone else. Not even with my future partner.

But I didn't want to go out of my way to tell Miyagi that.

「That's a pretty nasty way of twisting things in your favor, don't you think?」

「You do it all the time too, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi said in an unusually sulky voice.

I'm Just Doing Whatever You Tell Me To, Miyagi (III)

Part 40

I wasn't about to deny what Miyagi said.

After all, she wasn't wrong. Whenever I teased her, it was always intentional.

It was entertaining to see Miyagi lose her composure.

However, it was only acceptable when I did it. Whenever she did it, I found it irritating.

In other words, it was my exclusive privilege to ask questions that would trouble Miyagi. She should be the one at a loss for answers. Therefore, I pretended not to hear Miyagi's remark and replied with a question of my own.

「What is it that you want from me, Miyagi?」

「…… I don't have to answer that.」

She had no intention of answering my question, but it seemed like there actually was something that she wanted from me.

However, I didn't know what that something was. It piqued my curiosity, but pushing for answers would be tough, and it wasn't exactly a topic she'd be willing to delve too deeply into either.

"I see," I said, simply for the sake of replying to her, as I stared at Miyagi.

I wriggled around a bit, wondering if I could manage to free myself, but it only resulted in the necktie digging deeper into my wrists.

When I had warned Miyagi not to leave any marks earlier, she had loosened the knot slightly – but just barely. The necktie

continued to cling tightly to my wrists, to the point where I wouldn't be surprised if it did end up leaving marks.

「Stand up.」

Miyagi said curtly.

「Huh?」

「You want to be untied, don't you?」

「It's kind of difficult to stand up like this, you know.」

It appeared that arms played a crucial role in maintaining one's balance, so seemingly straightforward actions like standing or sitting became quite challenging with my hands bound together. Technically, I could stand up on my own, but I was a bit apprehensive about the possibility of stumbling and falling.

「Fine, then don't move.」

Miyagi said as she got off the bed and moved behind me. Before long, the cloth that held my wrists together was removed, and I regained my freedom.

However, my arms weren't as mobile as I had anticipated, so I shook them to regain feeling. When I felt that my blood was circulating properly again, I stood up and seated myself on her bed. Miyagi joined me, sitting next to me as she grabbed my arm.

「Let me take a look.」

Before I could even respond, Miyagi began examining my arm like a detective searching for clues.

「I don't see any marks.」

Miyagi mumbled as she ran her fingertips over the area where I had been tied up. She delicately traced her finger along my vein, as if following a trail.

As her finger slowly made its way toward the palm of my hand, I could sense my arm regaining sensation, as if reacting to her touch. Gradually, the sensation of Miyagi's fingertip became

increasingly vivid, causing me to shake her hand off.

「I knew it. So you were trying to leave marks on me.」

「No, I'm saying I'm glad it didn't.」

It sure doesn't sound like that to me.

The way she touched me and spoke made it sound like she wished that it had.

「Or are you saying that you were hoping it would leave marks on you?」

「No way. Absolutely not. What would I do if everyone at school saw that I had marks on my wrists from being tied up?」

「Well, good thing it didn't leave any on you then.」

Miyagi said as she kicked my leg. She continued to kick me a few more times as if using it as a substitute for words, before remembering the manga she had set aside on the table earlier.

However, I snatched the manga off the table before she could.

「I want to ask you something.」

「What?」

Miyagi asked as she glared at the manga that was in my hands.

「If I ordered you to do the same thing as what you made me do earlier, would you comply?」

「There's no way I'd ever obey you.」

「Right.」

I figured as much.

I knew Miyagi would never do something like that. Yet, I asked her that question anyway.

Even if I offered to pay her, there was no chance Miyagi would be willing to lick someone else's feet. I understood that she was simply having me do things she would never do herself. It wasn't particularly enjoyable for me, but I couldn't object since I had agreed to follow her every command.

「I'm not a pervert like you, Sendai-san.」

「No, if anything, you're the pervert here, Miyagi. You take pleasure in giving orders like that to me.」

「It's not like it makes me happy, you know.」

Maybe not, but you sure do seem amused.

Every time I voiced my complaints while still adhering to her commands, she always seemed to be enjoying herself.

While I hadn't meant to lick her in a suggestive way, she probably found that amusing nonetheless.

「Oh, right. You're having dinner here, right?」

Miyagi asked, swiping the manga out of my hands as she changed the subject.

「Yeah, I guess so.」

There was no need to argue over who the bigger pervert between the two of us was, but I couldn't understand why she suddenly changed the topic. Then, as if nothing had happened, Miyagi stood up, placed the manga back on her bookshelf, and left the room.

Not going to say anything else, huh.

Well, whatever.

I stood up and followed Miyagi. Upon entering the living room, I found Miyagi, who typically prepared something instant or pre-made in the kitchen, seated in her usual spot.

「Make something for dinner, Sendai-san.」

I couldn't believe my ears.

I'd made karaage here once before.

Since then, we had shared many meals together, but she had consistently turned down my offers to prepare dinner, so I never expected to hear those words coming from her mouth.

「Do you have anything in the fridge?」

I had many things I wanted to say, but I was afraid if I said too much, it might cause Miyagi to change her mind. Instead, I proceeded to the kitchen without uttering anything more than what was necessary.

「Well, there should be some eggs in there.」

Just as Miyagi said, there were a few eggs in her fridge.

But other than that, there wasn't much else in there.

I guess I could make fried eggs, tamagoyaki, or omelettes out of this…

I frequently cooked for myself, but I wasn't a chef by any means, so those were the only recipes that immediately came to mind when I saw the eggs.

What should I pick?

I thought to myself as I pulled the eggs out of the fridge.

In the end, I decided to go with making sweet tamagoyaki.

I cracked a few eggs into a bowl. Perhaps Miyagi preferred to have her eggs salty, but I wasn't going to bother asking her.

Since Miyagi didn't have an egg fryer, I opted to heat up a round frying pan instead and poured the eggs into it. Tamagoyaki cooked relatively fast, so it would be ready shortly.

Because it was cooked in a round frying pan, it turned out somewhat uneven and had a slight char, but it still looked appetizing.

「Alright, it's ready.」

I placed the tamagoyaki, along with a plate of rice, in front of Miyagi.

Placing it on the table like this made it appear somewhat meager for a dinner, but there were no other ingredients to work with, so there wasn't much choice.

「Let's eat.」

Miyagi said as she clasped her hands together and then picked up her chopsticks.

It was normal for us to share a meal together while acting as if nothing had happened in her room earlier, and today was no exception. Despite the rather harsh treatment I had received earlier, I sat down beside her and began eating the tamagoyaki with my chopsticks.

If anything, Miyagi likely believed that no matter what she did to me, I would always end up forgiving her. Well, I suppose that wasn't too far from the truth, considering I was the idiot who voluntarily obeyed every last one of her orders and then shared dinner with her afterward.

I glanced to the side. Miyagi was eating her tamagoyaki in silence. I could hardly believe that this was the same girl who had bound me and kicked me earlier.

「Hey, at least tell me what you think of the food.」

「I wouldn't mind if you made it again sometime.」

Oh, come on. Last time I made food for you, you said it was delicious.

She wasn't being as honest with me today.

Actually, maybe that was her roundabout way of telling me that it was delicious.

「Well, I'll do it if I feel like it.」

I said as nonchalantly as possible as I popped another sweet tamagoyaki into my mouth.

Chapter 13

I Don't Recognize This Side of Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 41

When I looked out the window, I noticed it was pouring.

It had begun raining suddenly, drenching everything in its path, including people, cars, trees, and the roadside.

Technically, the rainy season hadn't officially ended yet, so it wasn't unexpected to find that the weather forecast was inaccurate today. However, the rain was notably heavy. Perhaps because of this, Sendai-san might not come by today.

So far, there hasn't been a single day when she didn't come by when I called for her.

The rain was rapidly getting heavier.

If I had known it was going to rain this much, I wouldn't have summoned Sendai-san at all. As I gazed at the city now soaked in rain, I couldn't help but feel guilty for what I had done. However, if I were to tell her not to come anymore, there would be no chance she'd listen, so all I could do was wait for her arrival.

If I remembered correctly, the rainy season had already ended around this time last year.

Last July, I encountered Sendai-san at a bookstore after our exams were over and the rainy season had ended. That was the memory I held onto.

My exam scores at the time weren't great, but they weren't terrible either. However, this year, thanks to Sendai-san's unwavering support in helping me with my studies, my grades were slightly better than before.

But it wasn't good to keep these memories in my head.

I laid down on my bed and closed my eyes.

When you share experiences with someone, they turn into memories, and as your time together increases, these memories start to accumulate. Over time, certain memories might acquire significance and be labeled as special occasions, like anniversaries.

However, if something were to happen, those labels could easily peel right off, and all the joyful memories with that person might transform into bitter ones tainted by resentment. Ultimately, the more happy memories you shared with someone, the more bad memories you'd be left with in the end.

I was relieved that I couldn't recall the exact date when Sendai-san and I first met at the bookstore. I didn't want to attach too many labels to her.

But with enough time, something will inevitably change – even if I didn't want it to.

Just like how a mother who was always kind could suddenly leave her child behind, even things that never needed to change will eventually change.

—— One day, my mother left our home – left me behind – without saying a word. I had no idea what she was thinking, and I never dared to ask my father about it either.

Maybe they had an argument, and harsh words were exchanged, but I was just a child at the time, so my memories were hazy. As far as I knew, my mother simply left home one day and never returned.

But as I grew older, I came to understand that there might have been a reason for her departure and began to speculate about various possibilities. Nevertheless, it didn't change the fact that I once had fond memories of my mother.

The same went for my relationship with Sendai-san.

Even though she was quite talkative, I had never been able to

discern what was going on in her mind. If Sendai-san were to suddenly vanish from my life, I doubted I would even understand why.

We were changing little by little.

Ideally, I wanted us to preserve the same relationship we had as when we first met.

As we spent more time together, our relationship gradually evolved to the point where we no longer saw each other as two people who meant nothing to each other.

I glanced out the window from where I was laying on my bed.

My hair felt a little heavier on rainy days.

'I wonder if it's the same for Sendai-san?' I thought to myself, sighing as I reluctantly recalled the memory of running my fingers through her hair.

I picked up my phone that I had put next to my pillow.

There were no messages from Sendai-san.

She was late.

Even taking the rain into consideration, she was way too late.

The sound of the rain pattering outside could be heard in my room, so maybe it would be best if I told Sendai-san not to push herself to come by today.

I hesitated for a bit as I stared at Sendai-san's name written on my phone screen.

However, before I could make the call, I heard the intercom ring. Instead of going to the living room, I answered it using the phone connected to it from my room. It was Sendai-san. I quickly unlocked the entrance for her, and within three minutes, my doorbell rang. When I opened the door to let her in, Sendai-san was standing there, drenched.

「Did you not bring an umbrella with you?」

「What does it look like? Sorry, but can I ask you for a towel?」

The weather forecast had predicted it would be sunny today, so it wouldn't have been surprising if she hadn't brought an umbrella. However, it seemed that Sendai-san wasn't one to trust the weather forecast, as she was holding a small umbrella in her right hand.

「Well, just come inside for the time being.」

I said, inviting her in as her clothes were still soaked.

「Aren't I just going to get everything in your house wet?」

She was right.

If Sendai-san could get soaked by the rain despite using an umbrella, she was undoubtedly wet enough to drench my hallway and the rest of the house. Still, I couldn't just leave her standing there.

「It's fine. Even if the floor gets wet, I'll just wipe it later.」

「That doesn't sound fine to me. Just lend me a towel.」

「I can get you a towel, but let me also lend you a spare change of clothes. Can you take off your uniform for now?」

「You want me to do it right here?」

「Yep. There's no one else here but me anyway, and no one is coming home anytime soon either, so you don't need to worry about that. Besides, your clothes aren't going to dry off for a while, so if you entered the rest of my house, you're just going to get everything all wet.」

With Sendai-san's uniform being as soaked as it was, her only option was to try and dry herself off with a towel. If she was worried about wetting everything in my home, then she needed a dry uniform. While it would have been ideal to find a way to stay dry without needing to change out of her uniform, it didn't seem feasible at the moment. However, for some reason, Sendai-san was

being stubborn.

「You know, I'm not sure I'm keen on the idea of undressing by the entranceway.」

「Well, if you're so worried about getting my home all wet, then you should take your clothes off.」

「Just give me a towel.」

Sendai-san demanded.

She's not going to take her uniform off no matter what, huh.

Granted, I understood where Sendai-san was coming from. She was in someone else's home, and if I were in her position, I wouldn't want to do it either.

「Okay, wait here a bit. I'll go grab one.」

I said before heading to my room.

At first, I pulled out a hand towel from my drawer, but quickly reconsidered it. Instead, I grabbed a bath towel and headed back to the entrance of the apartment, where I noticed Sendai-san beginning to unravel the braid she typically wore in her hair.

Her wet hair slowly fell over her shoulders.

I'd seen her like this several times before in the past, usually after gym class.

However, it was different now that we were put in separate classes.

I'd never seen her look like this in my home before either.

Now that I had the time to get a closer look, I noticed her wet blouse sticking to her body, leaving her undergarments somewhat visible.

Considering it had been a while since I had last seen Sendai-san – combined with my sudden awareness of her current appearance – my heart began to race. I quickly handed her the

towel I had brought out for her.

「Here you go.」

「Thanks.」

Sendai-san said as she began wiping her hair with the towel.

「What are you going to do about your uniform?」

「I'll try to dry it off with the towel as well.」

「I'll lend you a change of clothes, so just take them off.」

「Do you really want me to undress that badly?」

「Yeah. If you stay like that any longer, you're going to end up catching a cold.」

Even though it was already July, the human body didn't discriminate by months when it came to catching a cold. Getting soaked and staying cold for an extended period could lead to falling ill regardless of the season. Sendai-san should have known that, but she seemed adamant about not wanting to remove her uniform.

「Don't move.」

I uttered the words I had used many times before and took hold of Sendai-san's hand.

「Is that an order?」

「Yes, it is.」

Sendai-san obeyed and immediately stopped wiping her hair.

I stared at her wet blouse.

The first button was undone, as usual.

But not the second button.

I took her necktie off and unfastened the second button for her.

「I didn't bring a spare change of clothes today.」

「Like I said, I can just lend you some.」

I thought back to the day we played the eraser searching game together.

I recalled that she had attempted to introduce a rule against either of us undressing, though I wasn't certain if this addition was considered official or not.

I slowly reached for her third button.

Sendai-san did not resist.

Even when my hand moved towards the fourth button, she did not say anything.

I knew this didn't necessarily mean I was allowed to do as I pleased.

But seeing how Sendai-san had followed all my orders until now, I wondered how far I could push her. It felt like she would forgive me even if I treated her like a dog and chained her up in this room. I was even starting to believe that she would forgive me for breaking the rules we established.

…… No, this isn't right.

Right now, all I should be doing is helping Sendai-san.

All I wanted was to make sure she didn't catch a cold – not test the boundaries of our relationship.

I was getting a little nervous, though that might've just been my imagination.

When we were in the same class, we used to change clothes in the same locker room. While I'd never taken anyone's clothes off before, I had seen some of my classmates half-naked.

So, taking off her uniform wasn't a big deal.

After removing the fourth button of her blouse, I managed to get through the rest of them without any trouble.

When I opened the front of her blouse up, her undergarments came into view.

She was dressed in plain, white underwear – nothing out of the ordinary. It had a simple design that you could find almost anywhere. I had expected her to wear something flashier, but that didn't seem to be the case today. She looked like she was wearing something that even I might've owned.

Yet, for some reason, my heart wouldn't stop racing.

What am I doing? If I leave her like this any longer, she's going to catch a cold.

Initially, I thought I had no ulterior motives for undressing her. I simply wanted to help. But right now, there was a part of me that wanted Sendai-san to grab my hand to get me to stop.

That, in itself, seemed to be proof that I did have ulterior motives after all.

I Don't Recognize This Side of Sendai-san (II)

Part 42

I brushed the strap of her bra with my fingertips.

The white shoulder strap seemed flimsy, as if it could be removed with the slightest touch.

As I gently moved her bra strap to the side, I observed Sendai-san to gauge her reaction. While it didn't seem like she was about to object, it was clear that my actions weren't appreciated. However, she continued to remain silent.

Letting go of her shoulder, I asked,

「Aren't you going to resist?」

「You ordered me not to move, but if you want me to resist, then I will.」

In other words, if I hadn't ordered her to stay still, she would be objecting to it.

That was essentially what Sendai-san was saying.

「If you want to resist, then just do it.」

「I will if you break a rule.」

「Isn't what I'm doing right now against the rules already?」

「Oh, for sure. If my uniform wasn't all wet, I'd have beaten you up by now.」

「So you're saying you're making a special exception today?」

「Yeah. I mean, you said it yourself, didn't you, Miyagi? That I'll catch a cold if I kept my uniform on.」

Even though taking off her clothes was clearly a violation of our rules, it seemed that it was fine as long as I had a reason for it.

Oh, I see.

So our rules weren't that strict, huh.

She was a lot more flexible and lenient than I had initially thought.

How awfully convenient for me.

「But I haven't even paid you yet.」

「Were you not planning to?」

「I'll give it to you later.」

Not giving Sendai-san a five-thousand-yen bill was inconceivable.

If she hadn't been drenched by the rain, giving her the money would've been the first thing I did. Without it, Sendai-san wouldn't come here anymore. As long as I paid her five-thousand yen, she would obey most of my commands.

The strict rules we initially established were gradually becoming more flexible, adapting to the situation however we pleased. I was allowed to delay her payment, and today, she was even making a special exception for me.

So there should have been no problem with me helping Sendai-san undress further. However, although I was the one who unbuttoned her blouse for her, I couldn't shake the feeling that I shouldn't go any further than this.

I can't do this.

I hated how it felt like I had ulterior motives for wanting to take off her clothes.

I hated the guilt it brought.

But most of all, I hated that Sendai-san was allowing me to undress her without any resistance.

She was always like this.

She often placed the most difficult decisions in my hands, forcing me to make the choices. That's exactly what she was doing right now. She wanted me to take charge of what would transpire from this point forward, as if she had nothing to do with it.

Even though you obviously don't want me to take your clothes off…

I reached my hand out and pressed my palm against Sendai-san's skin, just above her heart.

「You're so cold, Sendai-san.」

I wasn't sure if my heart was racing or not.

But Sendai-san's skin felt so cold that I momentarily mistook it for my own body temperature being high.

「Yeah, because I got drenched by the rain.」

Even without getting a closer look, it was evident that Sendai-san's uniform was soaked and was robbing her of her body heat.

Her cheek felt cold to the touch as well.

It was the same with her lips.

No matter where I touched her, she felt cold. When I instinctively withdrew my hand, she placed her own hand against my cheek.

「But you're pretty warm, Miyagi.」

Her cold hand was now taking some of my body heat away.

Come to think of it, Sendai-san touched me just like this back then.

Back when we kissed.

Her hands were much warmer than they are now. I recall it happened in May, but I can't quite remember the exact date or even the day of the week.

I wonder, if I were to kiss Sendai-san right here, right now, how would it affect the calendar I kept track of in my heart?

I grabbed her hand that was on my cheek and pulled her closer to me.

Although our lips weren't quite close enough to touch, her pretty face was now directly in front of me.

Our gazes locked.

I tried moving my face a little closer to hers.

But Sendai-san did not close her eyes.

Having the memory of us kissing in my mind was fine, but I didn't want to remember being rejected by Sendai-san, with her keeping her eyes open as I attempted to kiss her.

I let go of her hand and shifted my focus downwards.

Now unable to meet Sendai-san's gaze, I opened the front of her blouse.

I stared at her undergarments, knowing well that I wasn't allowed to remove them.

My heart began to react accordingly, and a small breath escaped me.

I gently moved her shoulder strap aside slightly and pressed my lips against her chest.

As I sucked on her skin, Sendai-san clutched onto my shoulders, but that was all she did. There was no attempt to push me away.

Instead of marking the dates off on my mental calendar, I marked Sendai-san in red instead. Rather than residing in my

memory, it should become a part of Sendai-san's body.

When I pulled my face away, there was a faint red mark left on her chest.

Her damp skin clung to my touch as I pressed firmly on it with my fingertips. It was as if the only part of her body that felt warm to the touch was the red mark I'd left behind. I felt her grip on my shoulders tighten as I put my lips to her chest once more.

「Weren't you supposed to be helping me take my clothes off?」

I looked up upon hearing the grumpy tone in her voice. Sendai-san had an unamused expression on her face.

「I doubt the mark will stay on you for very long.」

I replied, giving an answer that had nothing to do with her question, as if I were trying to come up with an excuse.

「Look, it'll disappear right away, so it'll be fine.」

The red mark I left on her wasn't too dark.

Most likely, it would be gone by tomorrow. Plus, I chose to leave it in a spot where other people wouldn't be able to see it that easily. There was no reason for Sendai-san to be angry about that, or at me for not undressing her properly. However, for some reason, I was feeling uneasy in Sendai-san's presence at the moment, so I backed away from her.

「I'll bring you a spare change of clothes.」

"You're just running away again."

That was what I expected her to say, but I managed to make my way back to my room without a word from her. I pulled out a spare change of clothes from my closet, rushed back to the entrance and pushed them towards Sendai-san.

「I'll be in my room, so come in whenever you're done.」

I said as I left for my room.

As I took a seat on my bed, I stared at my hands, which had been dampened by Sendai-san's wet clothes earlier.

「Today feels a lot more different than usual… 」

I clasped my hands together tightly.

Sendai-san seemed the same as usual but also somewhat different at the same time.

The Sendai-san I knew wouldn't sit back and accept what I had just done to her, even if I did have a reason for it. She would never grant special exceptions, nor would she allow me to leave a hickey on her chest.

Sendai-san was acting strange.

Or more accurately, something about her had changed.

I wasn't sure how she'd changed exactly, but there was something different about her.

But she wasn't the only one.

I was the one who fabricated an excuse out of thin air to persuade her to remove her clothes.

More specifically, I simply wanted to see her without her clothes on.

—— There was definitely something wrong with the way I was feeling.

It was strange that Sendai-san didn't resist me, and it was even more unusual how naturally everything unfolded.

「I'm coming in, Miyagi. 」

Sendai-san said, despite not typically announcing her arrival, as she knocked on the door.

「You don't need to tell me that. Just come in by yourself like you usually do. 」

I complained loud enough for Sendai-san to hear me from the hallway as she entered my room while wearing my t-shirt and sweatpants.

「Well, I guess I could've done that, huh…」

Sendai-san was wearing my clothes as if they belonged to her. It was kind of refreshing to see her in something other than her uniform for once.

Whenever I put on a t-shirt and sweatpants, they looked like basic loungewear on me, but on Sendai-san, they almost seemed upscale. I didn't enjoy being reminded of the contrast in our appearances, but it was a reality I had to accept.

I didn't want to accept it, but I had no other choice.

「Give me your uniform.」

I said, my thoughts still cloudy, as I rose to my feet and extended my hand out.

「What are you going to do with it?」

「I have a dryer in my bathroom, so I was thinking about using that.」

「Oh, that'd be a big help. I don't really want to go home in a wet uniform.」

She said as she handed me her uniform. Taking it from her, I headed for the bathroom.

Everything felt off today.

It was probably because of the rain.

Things like this always seemed to happen when it rained.

First, I placed her uniform on a hanger and hung it over the bathtub.

Then, I started the dryer that was in the bathroom and took a

deep breath.

「Things will be fine. Nothing strange is going to happen anymore.」

I mumbled to myself as I went back to my room and picked up the five-thousand-yen bill that was sitting on my desk.

「Here you go.」

I handed the bill to Sendai-san, who was standing in front of the bookshelf.

「Thanks.」

She said as she stuffed the bill into her wallet. And then silence filled the room.

I was reading manga and Sendai-san was busy with her homework.

These moments of silence used to bother me in the beginning, but I gradually became used to them. However, today was different. The silence felt suffocating, like it had wrapped itself around my body and was now strangling me.

Sendai-san was doing her homework right next to me, and I was leaning my back against my bed as I read my manga.

Even though we were just going about our usual activities, the atmosphere in my room felt stifling, and I had a strong urge to step out.

「Hey, you know how you always give me a five-thousand-yen bill? Do you swap out other bills for them?」

Perhaps Sendai-san was feeling the same way, seeing as how she stopped doing her homework and posed a question to me.

「Yeah, I do. Why?」

Well, I didn't exchange them every time, but rather, I preferred to exchange several bills at once.

I had settled on giving Sendai-san a single five-thousand-yen bill every time she visited, so I wanted to have them ready. Giving her a ten-thousand-yen bill and asking for change or handing her five one-thousand-yen bills seemed to emphasize the transaction aspect a little too much.

「Oh, nothing. I think that's kind of cute.」

「Huh?」

「I mean, you always go out of your way to exchange money just for me, right? Isn't that kind of cute in a way?」

Sendai-san said with a smile on her face. It felt strange to hear her words, especially since she was behaving differently from her usual self while wearing the same clothes I always wore.

「Be quiet. You don't need to flatter me like that.」

「Hmm, but I think it's better to express these kinds of things as loudly as possible. Wouldn't you agree?」

Sendai-san said, as if suggesting it was fine every once in a while, as she turned to look at me.

「Oh yeah, come to think of it, are you not planning to attend a cram school or prep school over summer break?」

「No, I'm not.」

「What are you going to do about your studies?」

「I'll just finish whatever homework we get assigned.」

「Well, of course, but that's just the bare minimum. Aren't you going to do anything else?」

「No.」

Deep down, I knew it would be beneficial to supplement my studies with something else, but I didn't want to. Enrolling in a cram school or a prep school wasn't appealing to me, and I didn't have anyone who could tutor me over the summer either.

「You better take your studies seriously. You've got an entrance exam you need to take at the end of the year, remember?」

Sendai-san said with a serious tone in her voice as she poked my leg with the tip of her pencil.

There wasn't a lot of time left until the start of summer break.

When I thought about the long vacation that was fast approaching, I couldn't help but feel a little depressed.

I Don't Recognize This Side of Sendai-san (III)

Part 43

At school, my emotions held little significance. Both the classrooms and the hallways were filled with excitement as everyone eagerly awaited the start of summer break.

It couldn't be helped.

There probably weren't many students like me who didn't embrace the idea of a long vacation, so my feelings were hardly considered by anyone. Being in the minority, I had no option but to accept the situation in silence.

To me, summer vacation was way too long.

Even if I stayed home all day, I'd be alone. And even if I hung out with my friends, I couldn't expect them to be available every day, especially since we were seniors with entrance exams ahead of us. While we did have some plans to meet during the break, they were fewer than last year due to their commitments to cram schools and prep schools. Even if we spontaneously made more plans, it still wouldn't match the number of times we hung out last year.

I wasn't looking forward to it.

I was used to being alone, but that didn't mean I liked it, so I wasn't particularly fond of long breaks.

「Shiori, you're going to get wrinkles if you keep doing that.」

Maika, who had finished her lunch, extended her arm across the table and began rubbing the space between my eyebrows with her index finger.

「That feels really weird.」

Shivers ran down my spine as Maika continued to touch the area between my eyebrows, which made me feel a little uncomfortable, so I took hold of Maika's hand and gently placed it back on the desk.

The classroom was bustling with activity and excitement during lunch break. Like everyone else in the room, Maika appeared to be enjoying herself, laughing as she extended her hand to poke me again. However, before she could do so, Ami – who was sitting next to her – managed to get to me first.

「Man, why is the space between our eyebrows so weird?」

Ami said casually.

「If you think it's weird, then quit it.」

I said as I poked her in the side of her waist, freeing me from her touch.

「Hey, that's a foul.」

「Suddenly attacking me between my eyebrows is also a foul, you know.」

After stroking the area between my eyebrows to dispel the discomfort from earlier, I stuffed the bread I bought into my stomach.

「I mean, you seemed a bit down today, so I thought I'd try and cheer you up a bit.」

Maika said sheepishly.

「Yep, I thought so too.」

I wasn't exactly in low spirits; it was just that I wasn't as enthusiastic about the break as everyone else. Nevertheless, both of them appeared concerned and asked, "Did something happen?"

Well, truthfully, something did happen, but I wasn't going to tell them that.

Sendai-san and I had promised to keep our after-school

activities a secret, and even if we were allowed to share, I had no intention of divulging what had happened between us that day when she visited after getting drenched by the rain.

「I went to bed late last night, so I'm just feeling a bit sleepy. But hey, maybe if you guys treated me to something nice, I'd feel more energized.」

It was true that I didn't get much sleep last night, but the part about feeling sleepy was a lie.

Creating various excuses for things I preferred to keep hidden was kind of a hassle, so I often found it simpler to sprinkle in half-truths in my explanations instead.

「Treat you to something nice, huh. What did you have in mind?」

Maika asked as she stared at me, though I couldn't discern whether she was genuinely considering my request or not. However, before I could even reply, Ami chimed in with,

「I feel like having ice cream! Can you buy some for me?」

「Why am I treating you to something now?」

Maika expressed her exasperation, but Ami continued to make after-school plans without paying it much attention.

「You don't need to treat me to anything, but let's go get some ice cream after class! It's so hot today.」

She was right. It was really hot today.

In fact, it was probably the hottest day of the year so far.

Even Sendai-san, who I passed by in the hallways earlier, was fanning herself with her hands.

Despite Sendai-san's usual sensitivity to heat, she usually left only one button on her blouse undone while at school. Today was no exception; her second button was fastened, concealing the hickey I had given her on that rainy day.

Of course, even if she had left two buttons undone, no one would be able to see it anyway. Besides, it was most likely gone by now. Nevertheless, I had a strong urge to check for myself.

It was strange of me to think like that.

I was aware of it myself.

But despite being aware of it, I still felt the need to confirm it myself, especially since I wasn't able to do so the day before.

Yesterday, after school, I called Sendai-san over as usual with the intention of having her unbutton her blouse so I could see the hickey I had left on her.

However, I couldn't bring myself to issue that order to her.

「Hey, about hickeys…」

When I realized what I had unconsciously blurted out, I quickly attempted to silence myself. However, Maika wasn't willing to overlook my mistake.

「What's this about hickeys?」

「Oh, uh, how long do you think hickeys last for?」

I abandoned the idea of searching for excuses and instead framed it as a question.

「Wait, what? Shiori, don't tell me… Did you give someone a hickey? Or did someone give you one?」

Maika eyes were brimming with curiosity as she stared at me.

「Look, there's no way I could do something like that when I don't even have a partner. I was just curious because I saw Ibaraki-san with one the other day.」

To be honest, I'd never seen Ibaraki-san with a hickey before. I came up with the excuse based on what Sendai-san had mentioned in the past.

According to Ibaraki-san, it was possible to get rid of a hickey

by cutting up a lemon and squeezing a few drops on it.

Seeing as how Ibaraki-san was the one who recommended this method, using the excuse that I had seen a hickey on a visible area of her skin didn't seem too far-fetched, so I went with it.

「Ohh, I see.」

The fact that my friends readily accepted my excuse highlighted Ibaraki-san's reputation.

It emphasized how one's everyday actions played a significant role in shaping their image.

It was things like this that often caused the truth to become distorted and fueled the spread of rumors.

「Don't hickeys last for quite a while? Right, Ami?」

「Whoa, don't look at me. I'm not sure either.」

「Whaat? Have you and Sugikawa-kun not gone that far yet?」

The "Sugikawa-kun" that Maika was referring to was Ami's boyfriend, who she had started dating recently. Although he attended a different school, I heard that the two of them often studied together.

「No way. We're in a pure and proper relationship.」

If hickeys were regarded as "impure" and "improper," then Sendai-san and I clearly fell into those categories. Nevertheless, since we weren't in a romantic relationship, ideas of purity and propriety weren't particularly relevant to us, and it wasn't like I was aiming to have a pure and honest relationship with her anyway.

However, it did make me wonder what the future held for us, considering the nature of our relationship.

I was placing too much stress on myself by overthinking things.

Lately, I was uncertain about when to call for Sendai-san.

Usually, I'd summon her whenever I was having a bad day.

However, I had already broken that rule I set for myself a while ago.

And now, I found it difficult to determine the right moment to send a text to Sendai-san.

I was reluctant to call for her today since she already came over yesterday, and tomorrow seemed a little too soon as well.

As I looked out the window, I saw a vivid blue sky that almost looked like a painting.

Not long after Sendai-san's visit to my house on that rainy day, the rainy season came to an end. Now, the weather was persistently clear and sunny – almost annoyingly so. There were no opportunities for Sendai-san's uniform to get wet again, and no reasons for her to take it off either.

It was hot and humid today, which was making me feel lightheaded.

I wish it was a little cooler.

While I didn't resent the sun or anything, I couldn't help but shoot a glare towards the sky that refused to let a single raindrop fall.

I Don't Recognize This Side of Sendai-san (IV)

Part 44

I couldn't lift my spirits.

Today was rather uneventful; nothing particularly good or bad happened. As a result, my mood remained indifferent, and I couldn't find a way to improve it. However, since Sendai-san would hunt me down if I didn't call for her at least once a week, I decided to summon her to help me with my homework.

For some reason, she looked amused.

Sendai-san seemed as if she was enjoying herself as she wrote in her notebook with her pencil. In contrast, I seemed to be the only one in a sour mood.

My body felt heavy, as if a rock were tied to my stomach, making it difficult to find motivation for anything today. Nevertheless, even on these gloomy days, tomorrow would inevitably arrive. Summer vacation was just around the corner, and before I realized it, it was only one week away.

Today was probably the last time I'd get to see Sendai-san before the break.

「Sendai-san, go pick out a novel from my bookshelf.」

I commanded as I snatched the pencil out of her hand.

「Go pick one out yourself.」

She replied with a slightly grumpy tone in her voice.

「I'm giving you an order. You can pick any novel you'd like, so go grab one.」

「Sure, sure.」

Sendai-san spoke as she had no other choice. She got up from her seat and walked towards the bookshelf.

I told her to pick any novel she liked, but she didn't return immediately. Instead, she wore a serious expression on her face as she took her time selecting a book before making her way back to me.

「Here you go.」

Sendai-san said in an exaggeratedly formal tone as she offered me the book, but instead of accepting it, I simply rolled the pencil across the table.

「Now read it to me.」

「I thought you'd say that, so I chose one with the least amount of pages.」

Sendai-san took a seat beside me and cracked open the novel.

It was a collection of short stories, and she began reading from the middle. This choice was unusual for her, yet it wasn't entirely out of character. It seemed she preferred seeking loopholes in my orders rather than adhering to them obediently.

I found that part of her personality troublesome.

At school, she always portrayed herself as kind and virtuous, but whenever we were alone like this, her true nature emerged. She constantly did things I hadn't asked her to do. It was maddening how, instead of directly defying my commands, she consistently sought subtle ways to oppose me.

Well, at least her voice had a pleasant tone to it.

Listening to her had a calming effect, making me feel somewhat drowsy.

「Hey Miyagi, lower the temperature on the air conditioner.」

Suddenly, the voice that had been reading from the novel was

now asking for cooler air.

「No. Now get back to reading.」

「I don't mind reading to you, but it's way too hot in here.」

Sendai-san picked up her notebook that was on the table and began fanning herself with it.

To me, the room's temperature felt just right, and it had always been that way, be it during the winter or the summer.

After all, it was my room, and I had set the temperature to suit my preferences.

But considering we wouldn't have the chance to see each other for a while, perhaps it wouldn't hurt to make a compromise for Sendai-san's comfort every now and then.

「Fine. If that's what you want, then lower the temperature yourself.」

I said as I pointed at the remote for the air conditioner on the table.

「You're so stingy, Miyagi.」

Despite my effort to sacrifice my comfort for her, Sendai-san responded with a rather impolite remark. Nonetheless, she grabbed the remote and lowered the temperature to a point where it felt a little too cold.

Seemingly content with the air conditioner now blowing cold air, Sendai-san took a sip of her barley tea and continued reading from the novel's pages.

Listening to her read aloud was making my eyelids grow heavy.

I laid my face against the table.

It felt nice and cool against my skin.

—— Actually, no, it was a little too cold.

I sat up and reached for Sendai-san's arm, noticing that her body felt rather cool.

「Wait, Miyagi. It's kind of hard to read like this.」

Sendai-san grumbled as I gently squeezed her arm a few times. My fingers then trailed along her arm, moving up to the inside of her elbow. As I explored her upper arm, Sendai-san spoke to me in a low voice.

「Stop touching me unless you want me to stop reading to you.」

「You don't have to read it anymore. Also, turn up the temperature of the air conditioner. It's too cold.」

I said as I let go of her and started rubbing my own arms instead.

「If I raise the temperature, it's going to get hot again. If you're cold, just put something on.」

She said with a dissatisfied tone in her voice.

「How about you take something off if you think it's so hot?」

「I don't have anything else I can even take off.」

「You don't need to wear your blouse, right?」

「You're such a pervert, Miyagi.」

I wasn't being serious, so her words were a little uncalled for. Then, I took the remote and adjusted the air conditioner to a higher temperature without further discussion. After a while, the once chilly room returned to the ideal temperature, causing Sendai-san to furrow her brow and heave a sigh.

「It's too hot in here.」

I'd known this for a while, but Sendai-san and I were completely incompatible both at school and in private. I had

attempted to accommodate to her ideal temperature on a whim, but ultimately, I couldn't tolerate my own room being too cold. In any case, Sendai-san should be the one making compromises when visiting my place, not me.

I unfastened a button on Sendai-san's blouse.

「It'll be a little cooler like this, right?」

There were times when I was permitted to undo the third button on Sendai-san's blouse, and others when it was off-limits. Today appeared to be one of those days when it was allowed, as she didn't voice any objections.

I ran my fingers over Sendai-san's chest, specifically around the spot where I had left a hickey on that rainy day.

「…… Did the hickey fade away quickly?」

I finally asked the question that had been on my mind for a while but hadn't been able to ask before.

「Yeah, it did.」

Upon hearing her mumbled response, I increased the pressure of my fingertips on her chest.

However, I couldn't bring myself to ask her to show it to me.

「Give me your arm.」

Without waiting for her response, I grabbed her by the wrist. However, she shook her hand away, as if disobeying me.

「If you're going to do it again, then leave one somewhere else.」

「All I asked for was your arm. I didn't say anything else.」

「I already know you want to leave another hickey on me. It'll stand out too much if you put one on my arm, so don't even think about it.」

「Fine. Where else can I leave one on you?」

「I don't know. Come up with something yourself.」

Sendai-san said curtly as she glared at me.

She probably had a lot more things she wanted to complain about, but refrained from doing so as knew she had no choice but to obey my orders.

That was likely her train of thought.

「It's fine as long as it's in a spot that's not visible to others, right?」

I already knew the answer, but I wanted confirmation nonetheless.

「Yeah.」

Sendai-san responded as if the answer should have been obvious.

I fixed my gaze on her. Considering there were only a few concealed spots, the only feasible location for leaving a hickey would be somewhere beneath her uniform.

I grasped her blouse, which already had three buttons unfastened, and unbuttoned the rest of it, revealing her chest and a peek of her undergarments. I briefly closed my eyes, then slowly opened them, focusing on the area just above where I had previously marked her with a hickey.

「Miyagi, it really is too hot in here.」

She said.

Nevertheless, I pressed my lips against her skin. Just like she said, her body felt hot.

It was different from last time when she was damp and chilled from the rain.

I sucked on her skin even harder than before, hoping to leave a mark behind.

As I moved back, I noticed a red mark that seemed like it was dark enough to last throughout the entire summer vacation. I lightly pressed my finger against the mark and caressed it. When I brushed the area just above it and tried to bring my face closer to her chest again, she pushed my head away.

「You're really into erotic things like this, aren't you, Miyagi?」

Sendai-san said as she buttoned her blouse back up.

「I don't think I've done anything that could be considered erotic though.」

「Isn't what you just did considered pretty erotic?」

「No. It's only erotic if you make it erotic.」

Sure, if there were any hidden intentions or deeper meanings behind it, Sendai-san's label of "erotic" would be fitting. However, I had no such ulterior motives or profound emotions attached to my actions today, so what she said was wrong.

I hated the fact that I was attempting to justify myself by relying on the word "today."

I didn't want to recall that rainy day again.

I didn't want to remember it or the feelings I felt back then.

Summer break was unreasonably long, but I had to admit, it was the perfect opportunity to reset my emotions.

I would be able to rid myself of any feelings I couldn't handle during the break. If I could just erase them, I was confident our relationship would go back to normal.

I stood up from my seat and collapsed onto my bed, lying face down.

"Keep reading from the novel."

As I hesitated about whether to say that or not, I heard

Sendai-san speak.

「Miyagi, have you decided on which university you want to go to yet?」

「Anywhere that'll accept me.」

I answered without looking at Sendai-san.

「You're taking this too lightly. Second semester starts right after summer break, so if you don't make up your mind soon, you might end up running out of time, you know?」

「It's okay, I'm not really interested in university anyway.」

「Okay, then what else are you planning to do over summer break? You might as well attend a cram school or something.」

Sendai-san started nagging me about things even my own father wouldn't bother with. I just wanted to cover my ears and tune her out.

Maybe it was because my father didn't take much interest in me, but he never asked about my career choices or pushed me to prioritize my studies. Even though I might not pursue higher education or a conventional job, ever since I entered high school, we never clashed over my future. He simply provided me with way too much allowance for a high school student, no questions asked.

「I'm pretty sure I already told you what my plans over summer break were.」

Having to explain my plans once again to Sendai-san, who lectured me even more than my own family members, seemed like a hassle. I had already told her what I was going to do, so I saw no need to repeat myself.

「Right. You said you didn't want to attend one. Well, in that case, why not hire a tutor?」

「There's no way I'd ever do that. Also, you're being kind of annoying, Sendai-san. Why don't you just mind your own business and let me do whatever I want over the break?」

I sat up on my bed and threw a pillow at Sendai-san. She effortlessly caught it in her hands and replied:

「No, listen. I know someone who'd make a great fit, so I thought I'd introduce you to them.」

「You're so stubborn. I don't need you to introduce me to anyone.」

「Their asking price is five-thousand yen for three sessions a week. Isn't that pretty cheap?」

「They charge five-thousand yen every session?」

I wasn't familiar with the market rates for private tutors, so I couldn't determine whether it was genuinely cheap or not.

「No, I'm fine with being paid five-thousand yen for all three sessions in a single week.」

「—— What do you mean you're fine with it?」

I stared dumbfoundedly at Sendai-san, who had said something weird with a grin on her face.

「Hire me as your tutor, Miyagi. I'll help you study.」

Sendai-san was acting strange.

This was not the Sendai-san I knew.

Essentially, she was offering to come over even on days when we didn't have school.

She'd never suggested anything like that before.

「…… Didn't we agree that we wouldn't meet up on weekends or days off?」

If my memory served me right, it was Sendai-san who had established the rule that we wouldn't meet on our days off. However, on days we had school, she was willing to obey any order I gave her for the price of five-thousand yen.

Even during the previous summer vacation, we adhered to that rule, and I never met up with Sendai-san even once. The same held true for winter and spring breaks, as well as weekends.

「Consider this my way of making it up for that time I damaged your textbook.」

Sendai-san said nonchalantly.

I didn't have to search too far in my memory to recall the creases Sendai-san made in my contemporary Japanese textbook.

But was she seriously using that as an excuse now?

That had happened a long time ago, and it didn't seem significant enough to bring up again. Besides, I had already considered it settled when I bit down as hard as I could on her arm.

「You want to make it up to me by becoming my private tutor? I thought we already settled that matter.」

「That was something you had decided on your own. I never agreed to it.」

「Are you really that desperate for money?」

When you think about it, there was really no other reason for her to keep coming over all the time, and now she was even willing to break a rule that she had made. In fact, it'd be incredibly strange if she wasn't in it for the money. Sendai-san didn't appear to be struggling financially, but I couldn't think of any other motive behind her behavior.

「Well, I guess you could say that.」

Sendai-san said quietly.

「…… I don't mind paying you five-thousand yen, but you still have prep school to go to, don't you?」

「My schedule's a little more flexible during the break, so I can come here once I'm done. I'll give you until the start of summer vacation to make your decision. As long as you're willing to study, I'll let you determine the schedule as well.」

「What happens if I don't make a decision?」

「Well then, I won't tutor you, and just like last year, we'll go about the rest of our vacation without seeing each other.」

Sendai-san replied casually as she flipped to the next page of the novel without reading any of the words out loud.

Chapter 14

I'm Too Used to Miyagi Being in My Life (I)

(Sendai PoV)

Part 45

I want to see Miyagi over the break.

Honestly, I wasn't entirely sure if that was what I was actually feeling, but offering to be her tutor over the holidays likely conveyed that impression. I didn't regret my words, but I did wonder why I had uttered them.

Not to mention, calling myself a tutor to someone in the same grade as me felt somewhat presumptuous.

Plus, it must've given the impression that I was being greedy and solely motivated by financial gain.

I submerged myself deeper into the hot water in my bathtub, with only my head above the surface.

「You're such an idiot, Miyagi…」

My complaint echoed throughout the bathroom.

The first day of summer break was tomorrow, and I hadn't heard anything from Miyagi yet. I should've expected as much. I knew she wasn't too keen on hiring a private tutor in the first place.

We had agreed not to meet on our days off, so it wouldn't have been surprising if Miyagi were to turn down my proposal. But I was curious about her reaction to my sudden suggestion.

I preferred to be regarded as a good person rather than a bad one, and I'd rather be well-liked than despised by others.

"Sendai Hazuki" lived by clear and easily understood

principles. I made an effort to carry myself similarly in my interactions with Miyagi, though I had my doubts about how she saw me. Nonetheless, the last thing I wanted was for her to misinterpret the intentions behind the suggestion I made.

Money played a central role in our relationship. I recognized that my connection with Miyagi was simply that, neither more nor less. I tried to make an effort to accept it for what it was, but there were moments when I felt a strong sense of guilt for accepting money from a classmate. The existence of the five-thousand-yen note between us was something I couldn't quite reconcile with.

As my connection with Miyagi grew stronger, the importance of the five-thousand-yen note became increasingly pronounced.

Nevertheless, I had grown so accustomed to our weekly or bi-weekly meetings that not seeing her left me feeling uneasy. I had even reached a point where I'd start worrying about her if there was no contact from her.

To be honest, I knew that I shouldn't be spending time with Miyagi during the break.

Lately, I had noticed that my emotions were getting the best of me.

It was important to take some time away from each other. By dedicating my time to other activities, I might be able recover the rational side of me that I had lost at some point and regain my composure.

Well, if it's best for us not to meet during the break, then I guess whether she responds or not doesn't really make a difference.

I looked down.

A small mark could be seen on my chest.

You don't have the guts to undress me, yet, you somehow have the courage to leave a hickey on me?

Miyagi was such a strange person.

She was always coming up with weird ideas.

Even when I raised objections, she would end up doing whatever she wanted anyway, and I didn't want to bother arguing with her either. But I did regret letting her leave marks on me.

Seeing these reminders of Miyagi always made me think about her, even when I didn't want to, and I would reflect on our past experiences together. Because of this, I hesitated to leave the bathroom, fearing that I might find my phone devoid of messages from her.

I hope the hickey goes away soon…

Summer vacation was just around the corner.

I'd be attending prep school and spending some time with Umina and the others.

My schedule was busier than last year, so I couldn't continue dwelling on Miyagi.

「I can't stay in here much longer. It's too hot.」

I stepped out of the bathtub and went to dry myself off in the changing room.

Once my hair was dry, I made my way to the dimly lit kitchen. I grabbed a sports drink from the fridge before heading back to my room.

I glanced at my smartphone resting on my desk and noticed a blinking light, indicating that I had unread messages.

Oh, what a pain.

It was already past midnight.

The only people that would message me at this hour were either Umina or Mariko.

Chances were, they wanted to make plans for something like a karaoke session or a mixer.

Earlier today at school, they were discussing their plans for

tomorrow and the days ahead, so most likely, their messages were related to that.

Umina mentioned her parents had forced her to start attending a cram school during the break, and she was also considering taking on a part-time job. Meanwhile, Mariko had also joined a cram school. However, both of them insisted they couldn't do without karaoke sessions or mixers.

I was excited about spending time with the group, but I wasn't particularly keen on going to a mixer. The guys Umina and Mariko brought along were often good-looking, but lacked personality.

I picked up my phone and sat down on my bed.

Just as I predicted, when I glanced at the screen, Umina and Mariko's names were displayed, and their messages were exactly as I had anticipated.

I can probably get away with turning down some of their invitations by using the excuse that I'm busy with prep school this year.

Right as I had that thought, I took a closer look at my phone screen and noticed that I had an unread message from Miyagi.

『Come over on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Let me know what times you're free. Also, remember to give me a heads-up before you come over.』

The message had apparently come in a little before midnight, which meant she'd technically sent her answer just before the start of summer break.

She had diligently followed the conditions I had established, and before I could even respond to the messages I received from Umina or Mariko, I replied to Miyagi's first, confirming our plans.

I was going to see Miyagi three times a week.

Admittedly, I knew this wasn't a good idea. Still, I felt a bit curious about how things would unfold, especially since we were about to meet more frequently than ever before. Part of me was a

little glad to have something to occupy my free time with besides attending prep school or spending time with Umina and Mariko.

To be honest, I wasn't really that excited about going to prep school.

The teachers approached their classes with dedication, yet their explanations were clear and easy to understand, and led to an improvement in my grades. It was enjoyable tackling problems I couldn't previously solve, and seeing my test scores rise was a gratifying experience. I liked being able to see the immediate results of my hard work.

Nonetheless, I had long understood that no matter how diligently I applied myself in my prep school lessons, my grades wouldn't reach the level required for the university my parents aspired for me to attend. The reason why I wasn't too excited about attending prep school over the break was because I had no choice but to go.

Despite having grades that could get me into excellent schools, it didn't really mean much to me.

I replied to the messages that Umina and Mariko sent me.

I embellished the messages, aiming to reply in a way consistent with the Sendai Hazuki they were familiar with at school, before sending them. However, the plans I had agreed to were solely those not involving mixers, so that idea was temporarily put on hold.

Ever since I got involved with Miyagi, I became aware of just how much I cared about what others thought of me, and it bothered me.

I felt most comfortable when I was with Miyagi. I could be myself around her, and her room was more comforting than mine.

But I didn't want to feel this way, so I had conflicting emotions about it.

According to the schedule Miyagi sent me, our first tutoring session would be on Wednesday.

I'd go to prep school in the morning and then head straight to Miyagi's place in the afternoon.

All we were going to do was study, yet I couldn't help but wish Wednesday would come sooner.

I'm Too Used to Miyagi Being in My Life (II)

Part 46

After returning home from prep school, I had lunch and then sent a message to Miyagi. Unlike my usual routine of going straight to her place from school, this time, I left from my own house.

Walking through the streets on a scorching summer afternoon, I decided to take shelter in a shaded area.

The sun blazed above, making it hard to believe it was the same sky that had poured rain during the rainy season.

The journey to Miyagi's place, which was a fifteen-to-twenty-minute walk, felt incredibly distant.

If this had been me a year ago, I would have turned back, but the me of today managed to reach Miyagi's apartment without a single complaint about the weather. After being buzzed into the building, I took the elevator to the sixth floor and walked down the hallway to her door. When I rang the intercom at the front door, it opened almost immediately.

「This is my first time seeing you like this.」

Now that summer vacation had begun, I noticed she was wearing a different outfit than what I was used to seeing, so I couldn't resist voicing my thoughts aloud.

「Like what?」

「It's my first time seeing you in casual clothes.」

She was wearing a t-shirt and a pair of jeans.

The Miyagi who greeted me wasn't dressed in loungewear or anything fancy. She had picked something comfortable to wear at home. Her outfit looked relaxed and casual, quite different from

how she usually appeared in her school uniform.

A small breath escaped me as I took in this new side of Miyagi, one I wasn't used to seeing.

「You're dressed in casual clothes today too, Sendai-san.」

「Oh, yeah, I guess that's true.」

My only plans for today were attending prep school and tutoring Miyagi. There was no reason to dress up, so I chose a simple outfit – a blouse and shorts.

「Your legs are pretty long.」

Miyagi said while staring at me.

「You know, praising me won't really get you anywhere.」

「I wasn't praising you. It was just an observation.」

Miyagi replied curtly before entering her apartment. Just like always, I followed closely behind her into her room. Once inside, she handed me a five-thousand-yen bill.

「Here's your pay. This includes today's and Friday's sessions.」

「You can just pay me after we've gone through the entire week.」

「That's harder to remember. It'd be a lot easier if I paid you at the beginning of each week, so just take it.」

We agreed on three tutoring sessions a week.

I'd prefer it if she paid me after the sessions rather than before. It just felt more comfortable for me that way.

Miyagi had a different perspective and insisted on paying me in advance. Moreover, she preferred a weekly payment schedule rather than paying per session.

「Our vacation started after Monday, so we're only doing two

sessions this week. Paying me five-thousand-yen is a little too much.」

「It's too much of a pain otherwise. Just take it.」

Miyagi said, as if she had no intention of continuing the conversation. She handed the bill to me and then proceeded to sit down at the table, opening her textbook.

「Alright, thanks.」

I had come to realize that arguing with her was futile. Her stubbornness ran deep, and it was a pointless endeavor that would only waste my time and energy. So, without any protest, I accepted the money and tucked the bill into my wallet.

The textbook she had open on her desk was an English textbook, and next to it were sets of handouts and worksheets that had been assigned as homework.

「Okay, sensei. What are we going to do today?」

Miyagi asked apathetically. When I looked at her, she had an obvious lack of motivation written all over her face.

You're just going to skip all the questions you're not good at and make me answer them for you, aren't you?

Even though we were in different classes, our assignments were mostly identical. While it would save time to do all her assignments, there was no point in that. I wasn't aiming to be a full-fledged private tutor, but I did want to help Miyagi with the parts she struggled to grasp.

「Well, obviously, we're going to study together. And don't call me "sensei."」

「Doesn't it have a nice ring to it, Sendai-sensei?」

「It's not like you see me as a teacher anyway. And be honest with me, you really don't want to study, do you?」

「Is there anyone who does?」

Then why did you accept my suggestion of tutoring you in the first place?

I held back the words I was about to say.

I was curious about her answer, but now wasn't the right time to ask. If I did, Miyagi might change her mind, or worse, she might ask me why I volunteered for this at all.

「For the time being, I'll just have you start on your homework.」

I picked up one of the worksheets and placed it in front of Miyagi.

「You're going to do it for me, right, Sendai-sensei?」

「No, you're going to do it yourself. But I'll help explain the parts you get stuck on.」

「Sure, sure.」

Miyagi replied, using the same words I typically used, before diverting her attention to the worksheet in front of her. I retrieved my own homework and set it on the table, then proceeded to work on it.

The room fell quiet, and I looked to my side.

Despite Miyagi's initial complaints, she was earnestly working on her homework. As I glanced at her worksheet, I spotted a few errors, and I mentally noted what I would teach her later. Then, I returned to my own homework.

Today marked my first visit to her room on a non-school day, but it didn't feel all that different from our usual routine. Miyagi had given me a five-thousand-yen bill earlier and sat down beside me, just as she always did.

But the fact that we'd be seeing each other over the duration of summer break was proof that Miyagi and I had gotten closer than ever before.

There didn't seem to be much point in growing closer to

Miyagi, especially since we'd eventually part ways after our high school graduation next spring. Yet, for some reason, I had chosen to come all this way to her house today. While I was intrigued by the person Miyagi was and found her place more comforting than anywhere else, I couldn't shake the growing unease about the path I was treading.

But even despite all of that, I still chose to come here.

I really didn't like this part about myself.

It was like giving myself a problem that couldn't be solved, and it would make my head hurt whenever I thought about it.

「Miyagi, what are your plans for tomorrow?」

I asked, trying to shake off the somber feeling that didn't quite fit the mood of summer vacation.

「Huh?」

「Are you doing anything tomorrow?」

「Why do I have to tell you anything?」

Miyagi asked as she lifted her head to look at me.

「You don't have to tell me anything, but I'm just trying to make conversation with you.」

「…… I'm hanging out with Maika and another friend.」

So, Utsunomiya and someone else. She was likely talking about the other girl in their friend group, the one she had been spending time with since they became third years.

「Where do you guys plan to go?」

「I don't know. Anywhere. Sendai-san, you're starting to sound like my parent or something.」

「I don't think I'm as nosy as a parent, though.」

I wasn't actually trying to pry information about their plans

out of her.

Before the start of summer break, I remembered that Miyagi wasn't particularly excited about the vacation, but she had mentioned having plans, so I thought I'd bring it up as a conversation topic – that was all. I didn't appreciate being compared to a nosy parent, though. If anything, Miyagi was the one behaving like a defiant child. I was just making casual small talk with some trivial questions, but instead of answering, she'd just complain. However, before I could say anything else, Miyagi interrupted, saying,

「No, you definitely are.」

「What's so wrong with making some small talk?」

I asked, poking Miyagi in the arm with my pencil.

「I'm going to go back to doing my homework, so stop bothering me.」

Miyagi said as her pencil moved across her worksheet. However, not even ten minutes had passed before she set her pencil aside.

「You know what, I don't feel like studying after all. Here, you finish this for me, Sendai-san.」

「Do it yourself. It hasn't even been an hour yet.」

「I'll try harder next time.」

「Fine, but at least correct the mistakes you've made, and then I'll do the rest.」

「What mistakes?」

「For starters, you got this and that wrong. There were a few others that I saw too.」

As I pointed out the questions she had answered incorrectly, Miyagi counted the number of mistakes she had made and frowned. However, the offer I had made must've seemed appealing to her as she began erasing all the wrong answers. I provided her with a few

tips on how to solve them correctly, and shortly after, she had managed to fix all her mistakes.

「I'll handle the rest, so in the meantime, work on the homework for the other subjects that you're good at. You can copy what I've written once I'm done.」

「…… In the end, I'm still going to be doing homework, huh.」

「Of course.」

As for the worksheets I was working on, I wasn't going to let Miyagi copy them outright. I had no plans to mention this now, but I intended to have Miyagi try to solve the problems on her own to some extent.

She probably hadn't expected me to suddenly start acting like a real tutor. A displeased look appeared on her face as she started working on her homework for her other subjects.

Of course, there was only so much we could get through in a single day.

A considerable amount of time went by as I kept working on Miyagi's assignments.

「Are you having dinner here?」

Miyagi asked as I stared at the numerous printouts scattered across the table.

I was a little surprised by her question, as I hadn't expected her to offer to serve me dinner over summer break.

Though, the food being served would likely be the same as usual.

It would be either instant or frozen food.

Regardless, eating here was much better than eating at home.

「Yeah, I'll have something to eat.」

After hearing my answer, Miyagi headed straight for the kitchen. I trailed behind her, settling into a chair by the bar counter. In silence, I observed Miyagi's actions in the kitchen as she submerged a silver bag into boiling water, eventually transforming it into a serving of curry.

The two of us brought our hands together and said, "Let's eat," before digging into our meal.

「Eating instant food every once in a while is fine, but you should really learn how to cook for yourself sometimes.」

I said as the curry – which surprisingly tasted better than typical instant food – settled in my stomach.

「Isn't instant curry fine? Plus, cooking is a pain anyway.」

「You say it's a pain, but what you really mean is that you can't cook, right?」

「If that's what you think, then you make something for me, Sendai-san.」

「Fine. As long as you prepare the ingredients.」

I felt guilty about always being treated to meals, so I thought it was only fair to contribute in some way. Whether or not Miyagi found it tasty, I could quickly prepare a simple dish. However, the person who initially proposed the idea responded with something unclear.

「Only if I feel like it.」

I guess that means she's not going to do it.

I sighed at Miyagi's half-hearted response before bringing another bite of curry to my mouth.

Having dinner together in silence meant that we finished eating quickly.

After helping put the dishes away, I gazed out the window while sipping on a cup of tea.

Since we didn't have school today, I arrived at Miyagi's house earlier than usual, and we had dinner at an earlier time as well. Nevertheless, the sky visible through the lace curtains was dark, and the streetlights glowed like beacons.

「I need to get home soon.」

No one ever said anything whenever I came home late, but that didn't mean I could stay here forever.

I grabbed my bag from Miyagi's room and headed for the entrance.

As I put on my shoes, I heard Miyagi's voice from behind me.

「Are you going to prep school tomorrow as well, Sendai-san?」

「Yep, and it's not just tomorrow either.」

While I was attending prep school, Miyagi would be spending time with her friends.

It wasn't like senior students had to study every single day just because our entrance exams were approaching. Still, for some reason, I felt irritated at the thought of Miyagi hanging out with her friends, even though there was nothing wrong with it.

I began to open the front door but suddenly stopped.

I turned around and grabbed Miyagi by the wrist.

「What?」

She had a wary look on her face. Ignoring it, I pulled her closer to me and put my lips to her neck.

We had gone as far as kissing before, but even this made my heart race.

Miyagi was trying to push me away by my shoulders.

But I couldn't stop myself.

Even though I hadn't planned on doing anything like this, I pressed my lips against her neck and sucked on it, but not hard enough to leave a mark.

Her neck felt soft on my lips.

The smell of her shampoo mixed in with Miyagi's sweat tickled my nose.

After parting my lips from her neck, I lightly brushed them against her skin once more before gradually lifting my head. A faint sigh escaped me, realizing the pointlessness of my actions.

It was hot standing by the entrance with no air conditioning, and my hand holding onto Miyagi's wrist felt a bit sweaty.

「Didn't I tell you not to do anything weird?」

Miyagi said firmly and shook my hand off her wrist.

「All I did was touch you a little bit. I didn't leave any marks behind either, so I don't think it's that weird.」

「That's not what I meant.」

「Look, not only did I help you study today, but I also did your homework for you, so…」

I said, trying to come up with a random excuse to tell Miyagi.

「…… How come this is the first time I'm hearing about this rule?」

「Well, that's because I didn't tell you about it.」

「Stop trying to make up new rules. Also, I'm pretty sure I finished most of my homework myself.」

「But there were some parts you had to copy from me, right?」

I retorted, backing up the fake excuse that I'd come up with on the spot, as I opened the front door. Miyagi trailed behind, grumbling, as we made our way into the hallway and stepped into

the elevator together.

We got off on the ground floor and walked to the entrance of the apartment building together.

「See you later.」

I said, before leaving the building.

「Bye-bye.」

Miyagi grumpily replied.

Unlike before, I now had a clear idea of when I'd be returning here next.

We would meet again on Friday, without the need for Miyagi to initiate the contact.

We didn't need to make any plans before I left – we both knew we'd be seeing each other the day after tomorrow.

I'm Too Used to Miyagi Being in My Life (III)

Part 47

There was something annoying about meeting up every other day.

The reason for that was because I had way too much free time today to dwell on the events of yesterday.

The longer I thought about it, the more it etched itself into my memory. It worked the same way when it came to studying. It stayed with me during my commute to prep school, on my way back, during my bath, and even as I lay in bed before falling asleep. There were plenty of moments for Miyagi to slip into my mind. And now, even though it was Friday, I couldn't help but wonder what Miyagi had been doing yesterday.

There were only so many things a high schooler could do during summer vacation, so a few possibilities crossed my mind, such as karaoke, shopping, watching a movie or going to an amusement park.

It was unlikely that Miyagi and her friends went anywhere unusual.

Where did you go yesterday?

I could ask her right now, but I doubted she would answer me honestly. She hadn't done so when we last met on Wednesday, after all.

「Sendai-san, I don't understand this part.」

Miyagi, who was sitting next to me, said as she pointed at a question with her pencil.

「Oh, for this …」

I explained how to use the formulas that were written on her math homework.

Explaining concepts I had memorized to her wasn't particularly difficult. I couldn't really see myself as a proper tutor, and I definitely wasn't doing anything deserving of payment. However, I needed an excuse to keep visiting Miyagi's place during the break.

I think Miyagi knew that too.

Miyagi had every right to be upset with me for kissing her neck as some sort of trade for helping with her homework. I was the one working for her money, so I couldn't blame Miyagi if she didn't accept the weak excuse I had come up with.

But how come she didn't get mad at me after I kissed her on the neck?

I wanted to ask her about it, but I knew it would be impossible to get an answer out of her. As the number of things I wanted to say out loud but couldn't continued to grow, I was afraid that one day, I would suffocate from keeping them all inside.

「… Where did you go yesterday?」

Out of the two questions I had been holding back, I chose to ask the one that had a higher chance of receiving an answer.

「I'll tell you if you do my homework for me.」

Miyagi answered nonchalantly as she placed her homework in front me.

Well, of course it was going to end up like this.

She probably knew there was no way I'd do her homework for her, so this was her way of indicating that she had no intention of answering my question.

「How about we stop here for today?」

I closed Miyagi's notebook and leaned my back against her bed.

「Already?」

It had only been an hour since we started studying, so ending our session now felt quite early. However, since it wasn't my usual time to leave yet, I decided to make a suggestion.

「Yep, we're finishing up earlier today, so if you want, feel free to order me around.」

「What are you trying to say?」

「I mean, my time today's not up yet, and we missed Monday's session this week, so to make up for your money's worth, I'm letting you order me around.」

Hopefully, she wouldn't point out that those words weren't something a real private tutor would say.

「Stop coming up with new rules like that all the time.」

「You know what they say. Sometimes in life, you just have to wing it, right?」

「No.」

「Fine, then you decide on something if you don't want to issue any orders.」

I was open to doing pretty much anything. She didn't need to give me orders, but I left the decision of what to do up to Miyagi. I had no clue whether she had any other ideas in mind because not long after, she said,

「… I'll give you an order.」

「Okay. What do you want me to do?」

「Take me to your house, Sendai-san.」

「Huh?」

「We're always at my place. Isn't it fine to change it up every once in a while?」

Of all things, why did you have to pick that?

I suddenly had the urge to crack open Miyagi's head and see what was going on in there.

Since I began high school, I never invited a friend over to my house. Whenever someone suggested it, I would turn them down. It wasn't as though my parents would suddenly appear every time I had friends over, but I couldn't rule out the possibility.

Plus, if something like that were to happen, it'd just be a pain to deal with. I didn't want to make it obvious that I had a strained relationship with my parents, and most importantly, I didn't want anyone intruding on my personal space.

「I'm just joking.」

Miyagi responded in a disinterested tone and reopened her notebook.

「I haven't even said anything yet.」

「You were going to say no, weren't you?」

「You don't know that.」

I said as I tapped Miyagi – who was wearing a pair of shorts – on her thighs, but she immediately swatted my hand away.

I guess she's in a bad mood now.

I took a deep breath before standing up.

「Okay. Let's go, Miyagi.」

「Huh?」

「What do you mean "huh"? You said you wanted me to bring you over to my house, didn't you?」

「I did, but…」

「Well, if you don't want to go, then I guess I'll just sit back

down.」

I was a bit hesitant, but I decided it was okay to invite Miyagi into my house. However, if the person who initially suggested coming over didn't want to go anymore, there was no need to insist.

「Okay. Are we going together?」

Miyagi stood up before I could retake my seat while asking something strange.

「I mean, if we don't go together, how will you even know where to go? Do you know where I live?」

「No, I don't.」

Well, of course she didn't.

She had never asked me where I lived, and I had never told her. It would be impossible to go to a place without knowing the address, so we had to go together. However, Miyagi stood still, not moving from her spot.

「Look, if you have something you want to say, just spit it out.」

「… Other people might see us walking around together. Is that okay?」

We had agreed to keep our after-school activities a secret, and we didn't even talk to each other at school.

Because of our agreement, no one was aware of my secret meetings with Miyagi. It remained our exclusive secret, and it would stay that way. Besides, even if I were to suggest going separately, it wasn't like it was uncommon for former classmates to casually bump into each other and walk together if we were heading in the same direction.

Plus, it would be inconvenient to leave separately if we were both going to the same place anyway.

「Yeah, I don't mind.」

I replied curtly, but Miyagi didn't seem convinced.

「If you want us to go separately, then just say it. Plus, it'll be better that way too, right?」

I wasn't certain whether Miyagi said that out of concern for me or if she simply wanted to avoid encountering any of her friends, but either way, she seemed really hung up on this.

「Nah, that sounds like a pain. Let's just go together. Besides, it'd be a problem if you ended up getting lost by yourself.」

「As long as I have a map, I won't get lost. My sense of direction isn't that bad.」

「Even if that is the case, I still think it's better to go together. It's not that far from here, and I'm pretty sure we're not going to run into anyone along the way.」

Of all the people I knew, I'd only come across Miyagi in this area. I'd never seen her here with her friends before, so we probably wouldn't bump into them.

After clearing out the table, I grabbed Miyagi by the wrist and dragged her out of her room with me.

「It's about a twenty minute walk. Is that okay with you?」

I asked while putting my shoes on by the entrance.

「That's so far.」

「I think it's pretty close.」

It was only a fifteen-minute walk if we walked quickly, so it wasn't far at all.

We entered the elevator, went down to the ground floor, and made our way to the entrance. We exited the apartment together, and although I was walking slowly, Miyagi was falling behind. I paused and waited for her to catch up.

「Can we stop by a convenience store on the way?」

I asked Miyagi, who was now standing right next to me.

「Sure.」

「Okay, let's go.」

As we walked to my house, I made sure to match my pace with Miyagi's so she wouldn't lag behind.

I'm Too Used to Miyagi Being in My Life (IV)

Part 48

We walked without any rush.

I made a brief stop at a convenience store, about a five-minute walk from my house, to purchase a bottle of tea and a bottle of soda.

The reason for this small detour was simple.

I didn't want my family to know I was having a guest over.

Carrying two cups to my room would have been too conspicuous.

However, I couldn't let the two of us walk through the scorching heat without at least offering something to drink.

That was the only reason why I decided to stop by the convenience store.

「We're here.」

We stopped in front of my house. I felt a bit uncomfortable in the sticky heat that made my t-shirt cling to my back. When I glanced over at Miyagi, she seemed like she had nothing to say. Instead, her gaze was fixed on my rather unremarkable house, as if she was looking at something unusual.

I took my key out of my bag.

However, before I could put the key into the lock, the door suddenly opened.

Is this bad timing?

Am I just unlucky?

Or is today just a terrible day in general?

I wasn't sure which one was the right answer, but in any case, my unfriendly mother emerged from the front door.

「Hello.」

Miyagi spoke softly, her voice tinged with nervousness, as she lowered her head.

Normally, in situations like this, a typical mother would respond with a "Hello" or say something like, "Make yourself at home," but my mother opted for silence. She just nodded her head and walked right past us.

I felt bad that my mother had left without a word despite Miyagi's greeting, but there was nothing I could do about it.

「Sorry about that. Don't mind her.」

I apologized to Miyagi as I watched my mother walk away. Miyagi seemed somewhat troubled but nodded in response.

There was a chance we'd run into my parents.

I had considered the possibility of this happening before our visit, but I never thought we'd actually encounter my mother. I felt the urge to vent my frustration to Miyagi, who had suggested the idea of coming here, but I acknowledged that it was my decision to bring her along, so blaming her wouldn't be fair.

「Let's go inside.」

I opened the door and invited her in before the atmosphere became too tense. As I did so, I heard a faint voice from behind me.

「Sorry for the intrusion.」

The two of us took off our shoes and went up the stairs, stopping in front of one of the two doors that lined the hallway.

「Sorry, give me a moment. I need to tidy some things up in my room first.」

「Are you the type who keeps your room messy?」

「Not really, but you know, just in case.」

I didn't particularly enjoy cleaning my room, but it was usually kept tidy. However, since I hadn't expected to bring any guests over and Miyagi was about to enter, I felt compelled to at least give it a quick once-over.

I made Miyagi wait in the hallway.

As I glanced around my room, my gaze landed on my piggy bank, perched on top of my dresser.

Inside, I had stored all the five-thousand-yen bills I had received from Miyagi. It wasn't that I minded her seeing it, but given its contents, I preferred to keep it out of sight.

For the time being, let's turn on the air conditioner as well.

I pulled out the drinks I had purchased earlier and set them on the table. Then, I discreetly stashed my piggy bank inside my closet before inviting Miyagi into my room.

「Feel free to sit wherever you'd like.」

「Your room is pretty big.」

Miyagi said as she glanced around my room before taking a seat on my bed.

「Your room's pretty big too, Miyagi.」

My room might've felt spacious, but Miyagi's was probably even bigger.

「Was that your mother just now?」

「Yeah.」

「Does that mean no one else is home right now?」

How troublesome.

This was one of the consequences of letting people into your personal territory.

I knew what would come next as soon as I invited Miyagi over, but I couldn't help finding it bothersome anyway, and I wished she hadn't asked me that question.

I hated letting people over.

I found it extremely bothersome, so I chose to ignore Miyagi's voice. Instead, I reached over the table, grabbed the bottle of soda, and handed it to her. Then, I sat down with my back against my bed. As I opened the lid on my own drink,

「Sendai-san.」

Miyagi said, as if pressing me for an answer.

「There's probably someone else at home right now.」

「Who is it?」

Miyagi was seated on my bed, acting as though it were her own room, but her restless legs revealed her discomfort.

「My perfect older sister.」

My older sister, currently a university student, came home as soon as summer vacation started. I hadn't seen her all day, but she was likely in her own room right now.

「In the room next door?」

「Yeah.」

「How far apart are your rooms?」

I understood that Miyagi's question didn't stem from any ill intentions.

Rather than asking out of genuine curiosity, she was likely just attempting to break the silence with whatever came to her mind. Nevertheless, her constant questions were starting to annoy

me.

「You ask too many questions, Miyagi.」

After taking a sip of my tea, I set the plastic bottle back on the table and reached for her restless right leg. Her legs were extended, and because she wore shorts, her knees were visible. I pressed my lips against her knee and let my tongue continue from there.

「Hey, I didn't tell you to do that.」

I pretended I couldn't hear her voice as I removed her sock.

The air conditioner I had turned on earlier didn't seem to be working yet.

Perhaps it was the heat's fault that I felt like I could do these things she hadn't ordered me to do.

I put my tongue on top of her foot and went all the way up to her ankle. Her soft skin felt more moist than usual and tasted like sweat.

「Stop it.」

Miyagi said firmly as she shoved my head away with the plastic bottle in her hand. I snatched the bottle from her and placed it on the floor. As I caressed her calf and softly pressed my lips against her shin, she fired another complaint my way.

「I didn't order you to lick my foot.」

「You were going to, weren't you?」

「No, I wasn't. Let go of my foot.」

「I'm not letting go.」

Miyagi could've ordered me to let go, but she didn't. A simple request wasn't enough to stop me, so I gripped her ankle and bit down on her big toe.

「That hurts, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi was being noisy, but at least she wasn't asking me unnecessary questions anymore. Plus, she still hadn't ordered me to stop yet.

Whenever things get like this, it felt as if both Miyagi and I wanted it to keep going.

In any case, it was better than her continuously asking me about unimportant things.

Afraid that things might escalate and change into something else, I decided to bite down even harder on her big toe.

「I told you, that hurts!」

「Don't make too much noise or else someone might hear you.」

The walls in my house weren't paper-thin, so voices from next door weren't easily audible. However, what we were engaged in wasn't something suitable for others to overhear, so I cautioned her.

「But this is your fault, Sendai-san. If you stop, then there's no reason for me to be making any noise in the first place.」

「Well, then order me to stop.」

I maintained eye contact with Miyagi as I spoke, and she returned my gaze with a glare. However, she remained silent. So, I ran my tongue over the bite marks I had made and planted kisses on the top of her foot repeatedly. I traced my tongue along the bone of her ankle and placed kisses on the underside of her knee, prompting Miyagi to withdraw her leg.

「Come here.」

She said in a hushed tone.

「Is that an order?」

「Yes.」

I followed her instructions and sat down beside Miyagi. As I

glanced at her, she touched my lips with her fingers, gently tracing their contours. But as she started to withdraw her hand, I grasped her wrist.

I couldn't understand why Miyagi was so reluctant to touch me sometimes, but she often acted like this. It kind of bothered me.

「You have another order for me in mind, don't you? Just spit it out.」

「I'll tell you if you let go.」

「Fine.」

As soon as I released her wrist, Miyagi pulled her arm away. Then, after a moment of hesitation, she slowly brought her index finger to my lips again.

「… Lick it.」

That was probably not what she wanted me to do either, but without pressing her further for answers, I gently brushed my tongue against her fingertip, taking the rest of her finger into my mouth up to the second joint. As I wrapped my tongue around her finger, it ceased its exploration of my mouth and remained still. I continued to move my tongue along her finger until she eventually withdrew it.

I licked the tip of her finger, as if chasing after it, and I let my tongue move closer to her knuckle. Then, I pressed my lips against the back of Miyagi's hand and gently ran my tongue from her wrist all the way up to her arm.

「The way you lick me is disgusting.」

Miyagi said as she tried to pull her hand away, but my lips were still pressed against it, and I firmly stuck my tongue in the space between her wrist and her elbow.

「Sendai-san, cut it out!」

She said as she forcefully pulled her arm away.

「Didn't I tell you to not make a fuss?」

「I wasn't making a fuss.」

She replied with a frown on her face. When she tried to stand up, I grabbed her by the arm.

Whenever I let my guard down, Miyagi will try to run away from me.

So, it was my responsibility to catch her.

Today was no exception.

I pushed Miyagi down onto my bed so that she wouldn't be able to leave.

「Get out of the way.」

Naturally, Miyagi sounded angry.

「Just shut up for a second.」

The thought of shutting her up by kissing her crossed my mind for a moment, but I quickly dismissed it.

My mind had been polluted with ideas from all the manga that Miyagi liked to read.

However, it served as evidence of just how frequently I visited her place and how many books I'd read from her shelf. I couldn't help but sigh at the realization.

A year ago, I could never have imagined that we would find ourselves in a situation where I would be pushing Miyagi onto my bed. If anything, Miyagi was the one always pushing me around.

「Isn't this against the rules?」

Miyagi was asking yet another question.

Before she could pile on any more, I silently bite her neck.

I sank my teeth firmly into her skin, causing Miyagi to fall silent for a moment.

However, that moment didn't last for very long, and she quickly went back to making a fuss.

「Sendai-san, that hurts.」

Miyagi protested as she pushed my shoulders.

However, I wasn't going to stop myself.

「Hey, I said that hurts, so stop it already.」

She genuinely didn't like this.

The hands attempting to push me away with filled with force.

「You say that, but you do this to me all the time.」

I said, lifting my head as I stared at Miyagi's neck.

I felt a little bad because the place where I had bit her turned red, but part of this was Miyagi's fault too.

Although the place where I bit her was a bit different, she'd do things like this to me all the time. I had done it before too, but Miyagi was way worse about it because she would never hold back.

The more pain I felt and scars I got from her, the more it forced me to think about Miyagi.

She needs to get a taste of her own medicine every once in a while.

「… You're not wrong, but…」

Miyagi mumbled as she held her hand against her neck.

She rubbed it for a while, as if it still hurt.

I laid down right next to her.

Miyagi and I were both on top of my bed.

This wasn't the first time we were on a bed together, but we

were always at Miyagi's place. It felt a little strange having Miyagi on my bed now.

「Sendai-san, there's not enough space.」

Miyagi expressed her dissatisfaction as she attempted to shove me aside.

「Well, this is my bed, so don't push me. It hurts.」

「I'm the one that's still in pain, you know.」

She said as she sat up and kicked my leg.

「I know.」

Miyagi had left marks on me countless times in the past. I knew better than anyone just how painful it could be.

Well, I did kind of regret doing it, though.

I hadn't invited Miyagi to my room with the intention of things turning out this way, but it ended up like this anyway. If I were to associate Miyagi with my bed from now on, I suppose I've unwittingly placed a curse on myself.

「Let's start studying seriously next week.」

I stated, aiming to repair the emotions that seemed to be veering off course and taking an unexpected turn.

「I think that's for the best.」

Miyagi quietly replied.

Chapter 15

Sendai-san is Acting Overbearing During Summer Break (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 49

"I'll walk you halfway."

When I expressed my desire to go home, Sendai-san suggested the idea of accompanying me, but I declined. It was still light out, and I had already memorized the route we had taken, so there was no need for her to escort me. Besides, there wasn't much to talk about even if we walked together.

Even when we were going to Sendai-san's house earlier, we didn't really talk much.

Besides, I was more comfortable going home alone.

I felt a bit awkward considering what happened today.

However, despite my strong insistence on going alone, Sendai-san ended up walking with me anyway.

Even though you're so sensitive to the heat…

I wasn't sure when it was that my orders stopped holding any weight.

Even though I ordered her not to accompany me, she defied my words and left the house with me anyway.

I sighed softly, ensuring the person beside me wouldn't hear.

I asked Sendai-san to take me to her house in the first place solely because she had been behaving as she pleased recently.

She acted as though she had complete freedom over the

break. She kept making up new rules by herself and fulfilling her desires without my input, so I wanted to get back at her by forcing her to undertake an impossible task – I ordered her to take me to her house even though I had no idea where it was.

What kind of room did she spend her time in?

Admittedly, I was a bit curious.

Regardless, she would turn me down.

At least, that was what I expected, and now I regretted issuing that order so casually.

I ended up witnessing something Sendai-san hadn't wanted me to discover. It seemed like she'd been hiding it all along and wanted to keep it hidden.

'Sendai-san seemed like the type who was loved by her family.'

That was what I once thought of her, but now I realized it was merely a product of my imagination. When we encountered her mother at the entrance earlier, she left without even sparing a glance at her own daughter, leaving Sendai-san with a complex expression on her face.

The air around them felt tense and I could tell right away that they didn't have a good relationship with each other.

There was definitely something off between them.

I messed up.

No matter how uncomfortable I was with silence, I said too much today. It was my fault that I put Sendai-san through that experience.

Sendai-san was silent right now.

As if to make up for saying too much last time, I kept quiet as well.

If I were to apologize now, it might provide me with some

relief, but it would surely anger Sendai-san. Therefore, I had no option but to remain silent as we walked alongside each other.

Even when we walked side by side, silence was the only companion between us, so it didn't feel much different from walking alone.

I couldn't bring myself to look beside me, so I directed my gaze downwards instead.

The setting sun cast our shadows onto the sidewalk.

I walked at a leisurely pace, with Sendai-san matching my speed, much like our journey to her house earlier.

「So, Miyagi, what did you think?」

For the first time during our journey back, I heard a voice from beside me that had the same familiar tone, breaking the silence between us.

「Of what?」

I asked, not quite sure what she was trying to get at, as I turned to look at Sendai-san.

「I don't know. You were the one who wanted to come to my place, weren't you?」

She answered in a cheerful tone, as if forgetting what had happened today.

「Look, all I wanted was a change of scenery.」

「Yeah, yeah, I know. Anyway, tell me, what did you think of my room?」

Sendai-san's room had a modest level of decoration, not too extravagant yet not entirely bare. "An ordinary room" would be the most suitable description for it, and it wasn't much different from my own.

However, if I had to point out one difference, it would be her bookshelf.

Most of her bookshelf was filled with workbooks, reference books, and magazines that Ibaraki-san seemed to like reading. However, I felt like that wasn't the response she was looking for, so I opted to go with a safe answer.

「Well, it felt like a regular room.」

「Huh? Why wouldn't it be? What were you expecting?」

「I don't know. Something more high school girlish?」

「Oh, is that the kind of impression I give off?」

「At least, that's what it seems like at school.」

Sendai-san wasn't particularly flashy, but she certainly stood out at school, projecting an open and cheerful image. I was surprised to see her room wasn't entirely adorned with cute and fashionable items.

「Well, okay, aside from my room, do you have any other thoughts?」

Sendai-san pressed me for a response, appearing somewhat dissatisfied with my previous answer.

Before we left, I spent the rest of my time at her place reading the books that were on her shelf.

It wasn't like I'd gone over empty-handed, but I hadn't brought my printouts or workbooks with me, so I had no other choice. Meanwhile, Sendai had been engrossed in a book as well.

In other words, we spent our time together just like we always did.

「There was nothing else really worth mentioning.」

「I guess you're right.」

Sendai-san agreed casually, but then she suddenly came to a halt.

When I stopped as well, she extended her index finger, stopping it just before it could touch my neck.

「Does this still hurt? It's still a bit red.」

Sendai-san, who had pushed me down earlier, hadn't shown restraint.

She bit into my neck so deeply that I nearly thought she might draw blood.

I had experienced her biting me several times in the past, but this was the most painful bite I had ever received.

「It hurt when you bit me and it still hurts right now.」

When I responded with that, Sendai-san's hand lightly brushed the reddened area.

To be honest, it didn't really hurt anymore.

But it continued to throb, as if the pain was still there.

「Yeah, I'll bet. I was trying to make sure it hurt.」

Sendai-san said while wearing a serious expression on her face.

"Stop trying to copy me," I was about to say, but I quickly stopped myself.

I heaved a sigh, realizing again just how horrible I'd been to her this whole time.

I peeled Sendai-san's hand off my neck.

It's fine.

It's not a big deal.

Even if it was still red right now, it didn't hurt anymore, and it shouldn't leave a mark behind either.

「You're such a pervert, Sendai-san.」

「Yeah, you might be right about that.」

Sendai-san, who typically would deny such words, nodded in agreement.

Things have been going crazy ever since summer break started.

The Sendai-san I knew possessed self-restraint and wouldn't do something like push others down onto the bed. Even if she strayed from the orders I gave her, there was never any special meaning behind her actions.

She had caressed my skin with her tongue.

Even though it was just a simple act of licking, it felt as if Sendai-san was attempting to impart it with a deeper meaning in that moment.

No, that's probably just my imagination.

It wasn't a big deal, and I was sure I'd forget all of this by tomorrow anyway.

「Let's go.」

Sendai-san said, her voice slightly drowned out by the noise of the city.

Just like during our trip to her house, I couldn't determine the right walking pace.

When it came to other people, our strides naturally aligned, but it didn't seem to work the same way with her.

Was it okay to walk side-by-side, or was it better to have a little distance between us?

Even though my steps were hesitant and a bit slower, Sendai-san remained right next to me.

We continued walking down the streets side-by-side. It had been like this ever since we left her house.

Sendai-san was walking relatively slowly, just like how it was on the way to her house, but I couldn't tell if that was her usual walking speed, or if she was simply trying to match mine.

Nevertheless, as we strolled through the streets, the cityscape around us gradually changed.

I wouldn't mind if we walked a little faster.

But when I thought about how this could be my last opportunity to wander the city with Sendai-san, I couldn't find it in me to rush the shift in scenery.

Sendai-san is Acting Overbearing During Summer Break (II)

Part 50

Once July was over, August came and took its place.

After that day I visited Sendai-san's house, she became more dedicated to her tutoring responsibilities, and I, in turn, started approaching my studies more seriously. As a result, I have now completed most of my homework.

There was no need to rush to finish the rest.

The time I spent studying with Sendai-san wasn't exactly what I would call fun, but it wasn't too bad either. However, I felt like it wouldn't hurt if we slowed down a little. I was starting to get tired of solving problems and writing papers all the time.

But Sendai-san appeared to have a different perspective and continued to teach me earnestly without taking any shortcuts.

As evidence of that, today my table was filled with numerous open textbooks, reference books, and workbooks that she had brought with her.

I began to understand that the reason Sendai-san visited so frequently probably had something to do with her home situation.

This was the conclusion I came to after the day I went over to Sendai-san's house.

Well, it didn't matter what her reason was. The most important thing was that as long as she agreed to come over whenever I summoned her, it was fine. However, I couldn't help but wonder why Sendai-san, who had initially established the rule of not meeting on our days off, had a change of heart this summer break.

Even if something did happen at home, I wouldn't expect that

to be the reason.

I mean, it wasn't as if her home situation had suddenly changed or anything.

Moreover, she hadn't suggested coming over during the last summer vacation.

She hadn't attempted to change the rules during winter or spring break either.

So why now?

The mystery remained unsolved.

It's possible that something happened at home that made her uncomfortable enough to not want to stay there, to the extent that she was willing to alter the rules of our arrangement. Or maybe there could be another reason altogether.

「Hey, Miyagi. I don't see your hands moving.」

Sendai-san – with her hair not in its usual braid – said as she poked my arm with a pencil.

「I'm just taking a break.」

I glanced at the air conditioner remote and then took a sip of my soda, which had lost its ice. The fizz traveled down my throat and settled in my stomach. The soda wasn't very cold and didn't taste amazing, but I was fine with it.

「Miyagi, don't you think it's kind of cold in here?」

Sendai-san asked as she rested her chin on her hand.

「It doesn't feel that cold to me.」

「I guess it wouldn't, since you are wearing long sleeves today.」

Her soft voice echoed in the room before fading away.

Because I had pressured Sendai-san into revealing something

she had been determined to keep hidden, I hoped to alleviate my guilt by adjusting the room temperature to suit her preferences. As a result, I had put on long sleeves to ward off the chill, and at the moment, I didn't feel cold enough to complain.

「It's kind of irritating seeing you be so considerate of my feelings.」

Sendai-san said as she tugged on the sleeve of my shirt.

「Who said I was trying to be considerate of your feelings?」

「……」

She didn't reply.

Continuing the discussion about why I adjusted the temperature to accommodate Sendai-san's preferences would inevitably lead to revisiting the events of the other day. Knowing how much she wanted to avoid talking about it, she chose not to respond to my question.

With both of us having things we didn't want to say to the other, we passed our time together in silence.

Most likely, the reason why Sendai-san was holding back her words was because she wanted to ask me something she knew I wouldn't want to answer.

She probably wanted to know why there was never anyone home at my place, and how I managed to afford paying her five-thousand yen all the time.

She never pried into the things I didn't want to talk about, which was why I usually refrained from asking too much about her as well.

—— But I messed up the other day.

Feeling a need to reflect on my actions from the other day, I chose not to push her for an explanation for her silence.

「I don't mind if it gets a little hot in here, so just raise the temperature.」

Sendai-san said as she pointed at the remote sitting on the table.

「I'm adjusting to your preferences, Sendai-san. Why not just happily accept it?」

「So you were trying to be considerate of my feelings, huh.」

「I never said that.」

I replied curtly as I went back to focusing on my homework.

Then, Sendai-san raised the temperature of the air conditioner on her own.

「It's pretty hot today, so if you increase the temperature, it's only going to get even warmer in here.」

「Well, if it gets too hot for you, why not just take your clothes off?」

I shot a glare at Sendai-san, seated beside me, with a strong sense of déjà vu.

I remembered saying something similar during the previous summer vacation.

Back then, I had raised the temperature on the air conditioner that Sendai-san had adjusted.

「Fine, I will.」

The long-sleeved shirt I was wearing was solely to help me keep warm. I was still wearing a t-shirt underneath, so I had no qualms about removing the outer layer and took it off without hesitation.

「So what about you, Sendai-san?」

「I don't feel that hot right now, so I'm fine.」

「What a liar.」

「Look, I'm happy to adjust to your preferences, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san said as she raised the temperature once again.

「Never mind me, isn't this too hot for you, Sendai-san?」

「Not really.」

That shouldn't be the case.

The temperature that suited me best had always been too hot for Sendai-san, and she would often complain about wanting to lower the air conditioning.

Perhaps she had already decided where this conversation would go and I was merely being led there. Until Sendai-san spoke the lines she had in mind, the room's temperature would remain unchanged, and our conversation would linger on.

Sendai-san had been in charge ever since the start of summer vacation, and I wasn't really a fan of that.

Moreover, I hated not knowing what her intentions were.

I didn't want to continue going along with this any longer.

I solved a few unanswered questions and filled in the blanks in my workbook.

「Miyagi.」

The one who had insisted on us being more diligent in our studies extended her hand and closed my incomplete homework.

It wasn't my intention to obey Sendai-san.

However, if I left things as they were, Sendai-san would only grow even more annoying, and nothing interesting would happen.

「It's really hot in here, isn't it? You'll feel a bit cooler if you just take your clothes off.」

I said, speaking the words that Sendai-san likely wanted me to say.

「Well, if you want me to take my clothes off, you'll either have to order me to let you undress me, or order me to do it myself.」

「I don't have the right to order you around.」

「I'll let you do it, since you went out of your way to accommodate to me earlier.」

Sendai-san had been acting overbearing ever since the start of summer break.

She was behaving as if she were the owner of my room, making decisions without consulting me first. The fact that she was "granting" me the right to order her around seemed so arrogant, and right now, it would be problematic if I actually had the right to do so.

After all, the money I was paying her over summer break wasn't so I could buy the right to give her orders.

The five-thousand-yen I had been giving her was to cover the price of her tutoring services.

It was different from our usual after-school arrangement.

She was probably just trying to tease me a little bit and then be done with it.

I wouldn't be surprised if that was what she was going for.

「Are you not going to give me an order?」

Sendai-san asked, as if she knew exactly what would come next.

At the moment, she was sitting so close to me that I could easily reach out and touch her.

If I wanted to, I could undress her, just as I had done on that rainy day.

Right as I was about to extend my hand out, I stopped myself.

My palms felt sweaty, as if they had been dampened by the rain.

So instead, I simply stared at Sendai-san.

「Will you take your clothes off if I order you to?」

「Why don't you try and see?」

Sendai-san said with a smile.

However, it was just a fleeting smile, like a flyer meant to be discarded, and I couldn't tell what she was thinking behind it.

Sendai-san's words were like a maze. Although it seemed like there were many paths to choose from, there was only one that would lead to the exit.

Even if I didn't want to, I decided to speak the words she had been guiding me towards.

「Fine, then I order you to take off your clothes.」

She was wearing a blouse and a pair of shorts.

Sendai-san, wearing a similar outfit as she did at the beginning of summer vacation, began unbuttoning her blouse without hesitation.

One button, then two, and then a third.

She continued until she reached the last button before trying to take off the blouse entirely.

「Wait, wait, hold on a minute.」

Out of reflex, I pulled her blouse back up for her, which looked like it was about to fall off her shoulders.

「Miyagi, don't grab my hair. That hurts.」

Sendai-san spoke with a calm tone in her voice and a composed expression on her face.

While it was true that I had accidentally pulled some of her hair while raising her blouse, that was a minor concern compared to the larger issue at hand.

「Why are you actually taking it off?」

「Wasn't that what you ordered me to do?」

「Yeah, but you do know I was just joking, right?」

「Well, even if it is a joke, it doesn't change the fact that it's an order.」

Sendai-san shook my hand off and then removed her blouse.

I did give her the order.

But I hadn't expected her to actually listen just because I followed her script.

I had no intention of undressing Sendai-san or seeing her naked.

Those thoughts were far from my mind at the moment.

But for some reason, my heart started pumping so hard that I could almost hear my blood flowing through my veins, and I instinctively looked away.

「Is there a reason you're not looking at me?」

「Normally, I don't stare at people when they're undressing.」

「Has anything you've ever done been normal, Miyagi?」

「What, are you trying to say that you want me to look at you?」

「No, not really, but it's kind of annoying when you immediately look away like that. Just turn and face me already.」

I was the only one whose words held authority, and Sendai-

san had no right to issue orders to me, so I could easily dismiss what she said.

But still, I turned my gaze towards Sendai-san anyway.

「It's a little hard for me to take off my clothes now that you're staring.」

「You've got a lot to complain about, don't you, Sendai-san?」

When I said that, Sendai-san laughed as she took off her blouse.

Her shoulders were slowly being exposed.

In my direct line of sight, Sendai-san's upper body was now only covered by her underwear.

What temperature did she set the air conditioner to?

My room felt a bit warm, and a rather pointless thought began to cross my mind.

Sendai-san dropped the blouse that was in her hand onto the floor and brushed aside the hair that was in the way.

I clenched my dampened palms into fists as I admired her beauty.

The outside temperature had exceeded thirty degrees since the morning. It was a scorching midsummer day, and it was so hot that if I cracked open the window, I felt like I could die from the heat. However, the temperature inside my room had been carefully adjusted to suit Sendai-san's comfort.

The temperature had increased slightly now, but it wasn't so hot that she needed to remove her clothes. However, Sendai-san decided to do it anyway. All I could think was how the heat had seemingly fried my brain, melting away the screws that held my sanity intact. Things had been getting strange since the beginning of summer vacation, but today had been the strangest day by far.

I hated the fact that I couldn't grasp what was happening

anymore, and it was driving me crazy.

Why was Sendai-san doing this?

I wanted to find out, yet at the same time, I felt like I shouldn't.

Sendai-san is Acting Overbearing During Summer Break (III)

Part 51

Her bra was a light blue color, almost like aqua.

It looked much different from the white undergarments I saw her wearing on that rainy day.

It had delicate lace decorations and looked rather cute. It was a bit different from Sendai-san's usual style, but it suited her nicely.

Her breasts weren't exactly big, but they were a bit larger than mine. As my eyes moved downward, I noticed her abdomen was a little firm and toned.

I didn't mean to stare at her like this.

But I couldn't take my eyes off her.

I hoped that the loud thumping of my heart, which I worried Sendai-san might hear, was simply my imagination. It would be strange if it wasn't.

「Okay, now it's your turn, Miyagi.」

「Huh?」

I met Sendai-san's gaze upon hearing my name suddenly.

「You take off your clothes too, Miyagi. It's pretty hot in here, isn't it?」

Her words reached my ears, but I couldn't make any sense of them. It felt like listening to a jumbled mix of incomprehensible sounds, as if it were a foreign language from another world.

「Miyagi.」

I couldn't bring myself to move as Sendai-san called my name and closed the distance between us.

She was getting too close.

I caught glimpses of parts of her body that were typically concealed by clothing, and my first instinct was to push Sendai-san away by her shoulders. But she resisted my attempt to create distance between us, and instead, she tugged at the hem of my t-shirt. As her fingers brushed against the fabric of my shirt, I finally grasped the meaning behind her earlier words and understood what she had said.

「No, I'm fine. I don't find it that hot in here, so I don't think there's any need for me to take off my clothes.」

I said firmly as I shoved Sendai-san's hands away from me, but she refused to give up.

「Yes, there is. Now hurry up and take them off.」

She responded bluntly and, without hesitation, extended her hands once more to tug at the hem of my t-shirt, attempting to lift it up.

「Hey, wait a minute – Sendai-san!」

I panicked as I attempted to pull Sendai-san's hands away. Despite my efforts, she held firm and continued to lift my shirt, revealing about half of my stomach.

I hadn't expected this.

While I had occasionally undressed Sendai-san, I had never considered the possibility of having my own clothes removed by her. It hadn't even occurred to me. After all, the order I had given her was to undress herself, not me.

I hit Sendai-san on the head with my tissue box to get her to loosen her grip on my t-shirt. The crocodile cover on the box rustled upon impact, and she responded with a slightly exaggerated, "Ouch".

「Taking off your clothes isn't that big of a deal, right? I

mean, you change your clothes at school all the time too.」

Sendai-san let go of the hem of my t-shirt to stroke the spot where I had hit her, and then brushed her hair back.

「Yeah, but I'm not changing my clothes right now. You're just trying to get me to strip.」

「Come on, Miyagi, don't sweat the little details.」

「These aren't "little details". If anything, you're just too broad-minded, Sendai-san.」

「If you spend all your time stressing over the small stuff, you'll go bald, you know?」

Sendai-san tugged on my bangs and said, "So just go with the flow, okay?" before grabbing the hem of my t-shirt once again.

「No, I don't want to.」

I smacked the hand that was holding onto the hem of my shirt.

「Well, if you don't want to be undressed by me, then take your clothes off yourself, Miyagi.」

「I seriously don't understand. How did it even lead to this?」

Sendai-san would occasionally do unpredictable things. She would catch me off guard by showing up at my place unannounced or searching for me in my classroom.

It had been getting more noticeable ever since the start of summer break.

She'd do all sorts of things that I couldn't comprehend without taking my feelings into consideration.

「Would you get it if I said the only reason why I was willing to undress was just so I could get you to do it as well?」

Sendai-san said nonchalantly while staring at me.

「… You're joking, right?」

「Does it look like I'm joking?」

She should be joking.

Taking off my clothes wouldn't serve any purpose for Sendai-san. There was nothing particularly attractive about me, and I wasn't all that interesting to look at.

But for some reason, it didn't seem like she was joking at all.

「Anyway, if you're not going to take off your own clothes, then I'll do it for you.」

Before I could react, the hand that still clung to the hem of my t-shirt lifted it up.

「I'd rather take my own clothes off than to have someone else do it for me.」

I said as I grabbed Sendai-san by the wrist.

It appeared she wouldn't change her mind no matter what I said, so given the choice between stripping myself or being stripped, I opted for the former.

「Okay.」

Sendai-san replied as she withdrew her hand.

I lowered my gaze and sighed.

When I raised my head slowly, I saw Sendai-san, with only her underwear on her upper body – and now for some reason, I was also getting ready to take off my own t-shirt.

This incomprehensible situation had me feeling dizzy.

"Absurd" was the only word I could use to describe what was happening.

I shouldn't have to listen to what Sendai-san tells me to do.

If I got up and left for the kitchen right now, I could escape from this nonsense.

「Did you want me to take off your clothes for you after all?」

Sendai-san asked with a grin on her face as she pulled on my arm.

「No, I'll do it myself. Turn around for a bit.」

While she hadn't explicitly stated that she wouldn't let me escape, I could sense that she was strongly implying it.

「Why? You were watching me when I was undressing, weren't you?」

「I only did it because you were the one who told me to look.」

「Yeah, but you still saw me undress, so I think I have the right to watch you do it too.」

「No, you don't. Now look somewhere else.」

I placed my hand against Sendai-san's cheek and turned her head to face the bed, but she immediately turned back to me and said teasingly,

「Miyagi, you're being way too self-conscious.」

I quickly took off my t-shirt in response to her words, which seemed to imply that there was a deeper meaning behind my attempt to avoid her gaze.

It was painful having her stare at me.

I had no idea what she found so interesting, but her intense gaze made me feel uneasy. However, if I attempted to cover my body now, I had a feeling she would tease me even more, so that wasn't an option.

If I had known it would come to this, I should've worn some

cuter underwear.

The underwear I had on today was my typical white underwear. Naturally, I hadn't selected it with the intention of showing it to anyone else.

「I took my shirt, but… Now what?」

I spoke nonchalantly, as if it were no big deal. When I glanced at Sendai-san, her brows furrowed briefly, and she looked momentarily perplexed. However, she quickly regained her smile and started gently stroking the side of my abdomen.

「Don't do that.」

Without any fabric separating us, her hand brushing against me felt ticklish. I attempted to grab her arm, but before I could, she playfully pinched my side.

「Hey, Sendai-san!」

I brushed Sendai-san's hand away and covered the side of my abdomen.

「That felt nice and soft.」

「You're so annoying.」

「Come on, it's fine, isn't it? It was just a little touch.」

「No, it's not fine. Don't touch me.」

「That's okay. I'm fine with just looking.」

I wasn't sure what was "okay" about any of this, but Sendai-san was now staring at me without reservation.

「Don't do that either.」

Looking at Sendai-san was one thing, but being the subject of her gaze was another.

If I continue to go along with everything she says, I'll just end up matching her pace forever.

「Miyagi, your face is a little red.」

Sendai-san said as she slowly extended her hand out and gently stroked my cheek.

Then, she pressed the palm of her hand against it, as if trying to take some of its heat for herself.

That alone caused my heart to thump so loudly that I almost forgot how to breathe, and I quickly pulled her hand away.

「I'm just a little embarrassed, that's all. I'm not as attractive as you are, Sendai-san.」

「Girls are cuter when they have a little bit of meat on their bones.」

「I really don't like this part of you, Sendai-san.」

「Oh, does that mean there are parts of me that you do like?」

「No.」

I answered immediately before turning away.

As I hugged my knees together, Sendai-san tapped my arm.

「That kind of hurts to hear, you know? Give it a little more thought.」

Her voice had a lighter tone compared to the weight of her words, giving the impression that she wasn't hurt at all.

However, since I wasn't looking at her, I had no idea what kind of expression she was wearing on her face when she said those words.

「You know, I like you quite a bit, Miyagi.」

She spoke in a deliberately cheerful voice beside me.

「Sendai-san, I think your brain is rotting from the heat.」

「Yeah, you might be right about that. Be sure to look after me, Miyagi.」

「I won't. Also, don't lean so close to me.」

Before I realized it, there was no space between us anymore, and I couldn't help but grumble when our shoulders brushed against each other.

However, Sendai-san didn't back off.

Her long hair tickled my arms as her shoulders remained pressed together.

「I can't move anymore since my brain's all mushy now.」

「That's such a terrible joke.」

「Hey, I thought it was at least a little funny.」

Sendai-san said in an unamused voice.

「Sendai-san, it's hot. And you're heavy.」

I had never been this physically close to someone, with our bodies touching and our heat mingling, after undressing. I wasn't sure if this was a common experience for others, but Sendai-san's body felt exceptionally warm.

「Calling me heavy is kind of rude, don't you think?」

「It's not rude at all. Now back off so I can get dressed again.」

As I tried to push Sendai-san – whose shoulder was pressed against mine – aside, she decided to intertwine our arms instead, resulting in even more contact between us.

「Sendai-san. That was an order. Listen to me.」

「Today's order was for me to undress, and I already did exactly as I was told.」

「Why are you making up new rules on your own?」

「It's summer break, so let's just let loose a little. Things will be more fun that way too.」

「I don't like summer vacation. Nothing about it is "fun".」

「It's fine, isn't it? Having a day like this every once in a while.」

「No, it's not fine.」

My arm was caught in hers, so I couldn't escape.

Sendai-san's arm was brushing against my side.

I didn't find this scenario, where body parts that usually don't touch were now closely connected, to be a positive one.

I wouldn't do something like this with Maika or Ami.

But for some reason, I didn't find the sensation of our body temperatures blending together all that unpleasant.

「Oh, right. Do you have any plans for Obon, Miyagi?」

「No.」

During the Obon festival, my father would be at home on one day, and I had plans with Maika and Ami on a different day. However, if those plans coincided with one of Sendai-san's scheduled visits, I had the flexibility to either cancel or reschedule them.

「In that case, let's study during Obon as well.」

Sendai-san said as she shifted all her body weight onto me.

「It's too hot, Sendai-san.」

「Don't worry. I feel hot as well.」

「Then why…」

「Because it's summer, I guess?」

Sendai-san replied to my question with an answer that didn't make any sense.

I felt as if I could hear the sound of a heart beating louder than usual, but I wasn't sure whether it was my own or Sendai-san's.

Chapter 16

The Things I'd Do When I'm With Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 52

When I opened the drawer filled with my everyday clothing, the first thing that drew my attention were the clothes Miyagi had given me.

Just before spring break, she had handed me a shirt to replace my uniform that got drenched in soda, which I had attempted to return to her.

However, Miyagi never took it back, and I wound up keeping it.

In any case, I had no intention of wearing it again.

I gently touched the shirt that I couldn't bring myself to throw away.

I had washed it with the purpose of returning it to Miyagi, so there were no longer any traces of her on it.

I shut my eyes briefly, then picked out a tank top and headed to the bathroom.

My family typically didn't turn in early on Friday nights. Even at this moment, it was already past 11 PM, and the living room lights were still on. I walked quietly down the hallway and entered the bathroom. Instead of leisurely soaking in the hot water, I opted to finish my bath quickly. Afterward, I retrieved a bottle from the fridge and headed back to my room.

I glanced at my phone sitting on my desk.

I took small sips of my tea while responding to the numerous

messages that had come in. After I had consumed about half of it, I laid down on my bed, still holding my phone.

I didn't intend to dwell on what happened today, but it still crossed my mind.

—— I took my clothes off in front of Miyagi and forced her to do the same.

I put my smartphone down next to my pillow and sighed.

Meeting Miyagi three times a week wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

It was natural to want to hang out with my friends on my days off. Such thoughts were normal among close friends, and meeting Miyagi during the break fit right in with this idea.

So there were no issues there.

However, the problem was that one of the rules we had come up with explicitly prohibited undressing or forcing someone else to undress.

I shouldn't have done what I did on that rainy day.

I should've brushed Miyagi's hand away when she tried to remove my uniform and then played it off by calling her an idiot. Instead, because I allowed her to break the rules, things were now starting to spiral out of control.

I heaved another sigh as I stared at my ceiling.

I had cursed myself for forcing Miyagi onto this very bed the other day, and I continued to curse myself even now. Those curses were beginning to seize control of my heart, causing my emotions to become twisted in the process.

The thought of taking off Miyagi's clothes and touching her suddenly crossed my mind.

However, right as I was about to imagine something more, I immediately suppressed the thought.

「This is bad…」

I shouldn't be imagining things like this.

Ever since Miyagi came to my room that day, numerous thoughts flooded my mind – thoughts I wouldn't ever dare voice to anyone else.

'I should've kissed her back then.'

'I should've left a mark on her.'

These were the absurd ideas that were polluting my head.

This was not like me.

I considered myself resourceful and skilled at socializing. Since I started high school, my school life had been relatively enjoyable, and I had intended to keep things that way until graduation, but my feelings for Miyagi were beginning to get in the way of that.

It wasn't like I disliked Miyagi.

I wasn't kidding when I told her that I was quite fond of her.

It was okay to have slightly stronger feelings for Miyagi compared to my other friends, but that wasn't the case here. I realized that I liked Miyagi much more than I initially thought, and I was struggling to control my emotions for her.

That was why I wanted to try acting like my usual self today.

I let out a huge sigh.

In the same way that a malfunctioning smartphone can often be fixed by rebooting it, I believed I could reset myself and go back to how I used to be.

If I had acted like there was a deeper meaning to undressing, it would end up making things awkward between us. So instead, I pretended that it was a normal, everyday occurrence.

I let Miyagi order me to undress, and I removed my clothes

without hesitation, treating it as if it were as ordinary as getting changed at school.

I knew I was just deceiving myself and misleading my own feelings.

It was difficult to force myself to change how I felt, but at least by doing this, I could begin to untangle my emotions and try to make sense of the situation.

Much like how it was last year, all I had to do was treat her orders – regardless of how tedious or disagreeable they might be – as a way to pass the time. I just needed to recall my mindset from when I used to view this as nothing more than selling my time to Miyagi.

That was the plan I had come up with.

But in the end, it didn't seem to work out very well.

I was okay with her undressing me, and I was okay with her ordering me to undress myself.

Those were the two options I had been ready for, and as I had predicted, Miyagi ordered me to remove my own clothes.

I was used to hiding my feelings. I had become skilled at suppressing them and moving on.

Therefore, I was able to take off my clothes in front of Miyagi without letting my emotions show on my face. However, that didn't change how I felt on the inside, and my emotions continued to run wild. Because of that, I even ended up forcing Miyagi to undress as well.

—— No, that was a lie.

The truth was, I simply couldn't stop myself from wanting to take Miyagi's clothes off. In the end, I realized that my hidden desires wouldn't vanish into thin air just by pretending to be composed, and I was ultimately left with a yearning to explore more of her.

Even now, despite regretting my actions, I couldn't shake the

thoughts of how soft Miyagi had felt and whether she had found my touch pleasurable. My thoughts were becoming so entangled that it felt impossible to unravel them, and I found myself dwelling on things I shouldn't be thinking about.

I'd been acting in ways that didn't feel like myself lately, and it left me feeling disgusted with myself.

I wanted to touch Miyagi – and not just through cloth.

I had never felt like this towards anyone else before.

There were an increasing number of things I wanted to do to Miyagi that I wouldn't want to do with anyone else. Even though it was the middle of summer, these thoughts of mine continued to accumulate like piles of snow that refused to melt away.

「I guess it's good that it's Friday today.」

My heart felt so burdened that I wouldn't be able to bear it if I had to see Miyagi again as soon as the day after tomorrow.

I found Miyagi interesting, but I just wanted our connection to revolve around the comfort I felt being in her room. I had already made the decision to leave home and attend a university in a different prefecture after graduating, and I had no intentions of changing those plans.

However, it wasn't like I aspired to lead a wholly pure and virtuous life either, so incorporating some excitement from time to time was a good thing. As long as I didn't become overly involved with Miyagi, I should be allowed to enjoy the time spent in her room and treat it as a pleasant little distraction.

I was well aware of how irrational and flimsy my arguments sounded.

However, when it concerned Miyagi, my thoughts were all over the place. I still didn't have a firm grasp on them, so the more I thought of her, the more uncertain I became about what I should do.

So it should be acceptable to overlook some inconsistencies in my arguments.

If anything, it was Miyagi's fault for constantly giving me such strange orders all the time.

Moreover, it felt like she'd become extra attentive to me lately, which made me feel a bit uneasy.

As I shifted the blame onto her in my thoughts, my gaze drifted toward the wall that separated my room from the room next door.

The last time I spent this much time thinking about one person was my older sister, who lived in the room next door. After my parents started favoring my older sister, she was all I could think of.

I've changed a lot since then, but my current behavior was reminding me of how I used to be, which was frustrating.

「Ugh, I've had enough of this already. Even though it's summer break, I just can't seem to feel that excited about it.」

I picked up my phone.

When I looked at the clock, it was almost 1 AM.

Maybe Umina's still up.

She was notorious for being a night owl, so as long as today was one of her days off, she should be awake at this hour. I decided to give Umina a call to clear up my mood. It rang once, then twice, and finally, on the fifth ring, I heard a lively and cheerful voice on the other end of the line that made it feel like it wasn't the middle of the night.

「It's pretty rare for you to call at this hour. So, what's up?」

「I couldn't sleep. Are you free to chat right now?」

「Sure. I wasn't really doing anything after my boyfriend fell asleep while we were on call together.」

It wasn't like I specifically needed to talk to Umina or anything.

Anyone would've been fine as long as I could pass the time. Though, I did prefer to talk to someone that I could hold a relaxing conversation with, so we started talking about trivial things.

It made me feel a bit more at ease hearing a voice that wasn't Miyagi's.

I was just chatting about anything that came to mind without putting much thought into it, yet the conversation flowed more smoothly and was livelier than all the times I tried to talk to Miyagi.

But I wasn't sure if I could call this "fun" or not.

I hung out with Umina last week, so our conversation ended up being about the things we did together, as if we were reliving the past.

「Hazuki, you haven't been hanging out with us as much this year. Is cram school really that busy?」

Umina, who always referred to my prep school as "cram school", asked without hiding her dissatisfaction.

I probably spent about twice as much time with her last year, so it was only natural for her to voice her complaints.

「Yeah, kind of. My schedule's pretty packed.」

I was being honest when I said that prep school kept me quite busy and disrupted most of my summer plans this year. Plus, having to visit Miyagi's place three times a week further crowded my schedule.

As the conversation progressed, Umina expressed her desire to go to a bunch of different places, then asked me to clear my schedule for those plans. I agreed, but whether I'd actually do it or not remained uncertain. However, this seemed to improve Umina's mood.

「Oh, right. Have you finished your homework yet?」

She asked, suddenly remembering it.

「I'm almost done.」

「Cool, lemme take some pictures of it.」

「Sure. Do you want to do it tomorrow?」

「Oh, in that case, there's somewhere else I wanna go while we're at it.」

Umina said, though the place she wanted to visit had nothing to do with homework.

I didn't really want to hang out that badly.

If this were the me from last year, I probably would've been more excited.

But that wasn't the case right now.

However, meeting with someone would help me take my mind off things, so I ended up making plans to hang out with Umina.

The Things I'd Do When I'm With Miyagi (II)

Part 53

I woke up feeling more refreshed than usual.

The reason for that was simple: it was all thanks to Umina.

We had plans for Saturday, but I ended up getting dragged around by her on Sunday too, which left me so tired that I didn't have time to think about unnecessary things. I hadn't planned on spending two days in a row with her, but at least it kept Miyagi off my mind, and I managed to get some good sleep in.

Thanks to that, I was able to go to prep school as usual before heading to Miyagi's place.

I could get by without any problems as long as I could ignore a little bit of awkwardness.

Like a treasure box that shouldn't be opened, neither Miyagi nor I mentioned what happened on Friday. She gave me a five-thousand-yen bill as usual for my tutoring services and quietly placed her worksheets on the table while I kept working on my own homework.

It felt peaceful in this room today.

We both knew we were keeping the events of Friday concealed within our workbooks, pretending they didn't exist while we worked on answering our problems. Still, studying in a calm atmosphere – even if it was just for show – was much better than a tense one.

Our conversations, which were never particularly lively to begin with, now stagnated further, enveloping the room in silence. However, that didn't really matter in the grand scheme of things. The world wouldn't crumble due to a lack of conversation, and neither would our relationship.

I did think it was a little too quiet in here, but it was better than it being too noisy.

I reached for my cup on the table and took a sip of barley tea.

Miyagi seemed less attentive to me today, and the room felt a bit hotter than last time.

I wanted her lower the temperature by a few degrees, but I couldn't bring myself to say it.

At the very least, it was cooler in here than it was outside, and I didn't want a repeat of what happened on Friday.

「Sendai-san.」

Miyagi suddenly started speaking out of the blue.

「Were you hanging out by the train station on Sunday?」

「Yeah, I was. Why?」

When I lifted my head to meet Miyagi's gaze, it seemed like she had been staring at me too.

Perhaps my impure thoughts had been scorched and consumed by the blazing sun on the way here, but even with Miyagi sitting next to me today, I didn't find myself bothered by them as much.

「I saw you walking around with Ibaraki-san.」

"Then you should've come and said hi."

I swallowed those words that I nearly blurted out.

We didn't have that kind of relationship.

「Were you hanging out with Utsunomiya?」

I asked, replacing the words I originally wanted to say.

「Yep, I was out with Maika and Ami.」

「What did you guys do?」

「We went shopping.」

Miyagi replied casually, even though she hadn't responded when I asked about her plans at the start of summer break.

「What were you guys doing, Sendai-san?」

「The same. I was just accompanying Umina while she was shopping.」

「Was it fun?」

Perhaps Miyagi was getting tired of doing her homework – either that, or she was getting sick of the silence – as she was now asking questions that she wouldn't normally ask.

「I guess so.」

I replied, and she gave me a skeptical look.

I didn't consider my time with Umina so boring that it warranted such a doubtful look. When I had responded with, "I guess so," it was at least half true. I was tired out after being dragged around everywhere by Umina, but I also had fun.

「Did you have fun too, Miyagi?」

It would've been too much of a hassle to try and dispel Miyagi's doubt, so I decided to ask her about how her Sunday went instead.

「I wouldn't do anything I don't find fun.」

「I see. Did you buy anything?」

「Yeah, I bought some things.」

「Like what?」

「Does that matter?」

It seemed that my luck with getting Miyagi to answer my questions had run out, and the conversation ended then and there. However, judging by her voice, it seemed like she had enjoyed herself yesterday, and her tone didn't seem that cold either.

I didn't really know much about Utsunomiya, but I knew she was on good terms with Miyagi. I wasn't sure how long they'd known each other for, or how close they were, but at the very least, they seemed to be good friends.

Their friendship was something I didn't share with anyone else.

My relationships with others were always calculated, which made me somewhat envious of their friendship. Moreover, it triggered unnecessary thoughts in my mind.

For example, if I were Utsunomiya, I bet I could touch Miyagi without a second thought.

I knew it was odd to have to add "without a second thought" to that statement. Normally, those kinds of clarifications weren't necessary among friends.

I'd believed that my impure thoughts had disappeared, but it was merely wishful thinking. It seemed I still had about half of them lingering, leading me to think about things like this.

—— This is the worst.

I dropped my pencil on the table before planting my face against its surface.

When my forehead collided with the table, it produced a dull thud, but I didn't pay it any mind.

「What's up with you all of a sudden?」

Miyagi sounded surprised as she asked, but I ignored her by posing my own question with my face still lying on the table.

「Are there any parts you don't understand? Tell me if there are and I'll teach them to you.」

「The only thing I don't understand is why you suddenly decided to face plant against my table.」

「In that case, continue with solving that problem set.」

「No, seriously, what's with you?」

「I'm just feeling a bit disillusioned with myself right now.」

If I let myself remain in this state, I might end up doing something similar to what happened on Friday.

I never realized how unreliable my own rationality was. I used to consider Miyagi troublesome, but now I realized I was even more troublesome than she was.

「What are you even saying? Take this more seriously.」

Miyagi's words sounded a lot like what I would normally say.

「I already gave it my all this morning.」

「But that was for prep school, right? Take your studies seriously while you're here too.」

If studying seriously could free me from this foolish obsession, then I'd dedicate all my energy to it. However, I doubted it would work. If anything, I felt like I'd have a better time just taking a walk under the scorching sun.

「Hey Miyagi, do you have any bread at home?」

I asked as I sat back up and looked over at Miyagi.

「Like, regular loaf bread?」

「Yeah. Oh, and what about milk and eggs?」

「I don't have any of those, but why are you asking?」

「Don't you feel like having some French toast?」

「No, I don't.」

「But I do.」

We weren't close enough for me to invite her on a walk, and I couldn't just venture outside without a pretext, so I figured I could easily fabricate a reason.

I just needed a change in scenery to lift my spirits, hoping that when I returned, I could sit next to Miyagi and finish my homework without being weighed down by unnecessary thoughts.

Miyagi rarely ever brought food to her room, but I didn't think it was a bad idea for the two of us to have a snack every once in a while.

「I'm going to go buy some ingredients for it, so wait here.」

I said as I stood up and grabbed my bag. It didn't matter to me whether Miyagi wanted to eat it or not.

「I don't care about the French toast. Just start studying properly already.」

Miyagi sounded grumpy as she tossed a box of tissues with a crocodile cover on it at me. However, I managed to catch it and put it back where it belonged.

「I never thought I'd hear you say that.」

「Sendai-san, every time you try to start something, it always ends up turning into something troublesome, so quit it.」

「The way you say that makes it sound like I'm the one always stirring up trouble.」

「That's because you are.」

「No, I'm not. Plus, the only thing I was planning to do was make some French toast.」

Though, the only reason why I wanted to make French toast was because I wanted to avoid stirring up any trouble, but I wasn't going to tell Miyagi that.

「Okay, I'm heading out now. Unless you want to come

with?」

I stated firmly, making it clear that I had no intention of changing my mind, and I included some magic words that would make Miyagi send me away.

「No. If you want to go, then go by yourself.」

Miyagi responded exactly as I had expected her to, and then she lowered her head to concentrate on her workbook.

「Alright, then wait for me here.」

If I could, I wanted to avoid going outside in this sweltering midsummer heat.

It felt tormenting having to walk through the city under a sky with no clouds and no breeze.

But right now, I had no choice but to go outside, where it felt like walking into a steam bath.

Leaving Miyagi behind, I left through the front door and got onto the elevator.

As soon as I exited the apartment building, sweat drops began to form on my forehead.

Having something sweet should lift my spirits.

I didn't really have any basis for that claim, but it was what I told myself as I walked along the sidewalk.

I feel like I'm doing something Miyagi would do.

I heaved a sigh as I searched for a shaded area to walk under.

She was always so unpredictable in her actions and would flee at the first sign of trouble.

Perhaps it was because we had been spending so much time together that I found myself acting more and more like Miyagi. I didn't want to believe that we were becoming too similar, so I tried to dismiss my actions today as a mere coincidence.

I pressed my temples firmly, trying to push Miyagi out of my mind.

I needed to buy some loaf bread, eggs, and milk.

I hadn't asked her earlier, but she probably didn't have any sugar at home either.

I sped up my pace so I could finish up this simple errand.

The Things I'd Do When I'm With Miyagi (III)

Part 54

In the end, the solution was pretty simple.

I didn't linger outside for too long. After going to the store and buying exactly what I needed, I went straight back to Miyagi's place. However, that alone managed to change my mood.

The scorching weather outside actually heated up my mind instead of providing relief, but it didn't matter because I had accomplished my initial goal of dispelling my impure thoughts.

「I bought what I needed.」

I said as I returned to Miyagi's room, where she was engrossed in reading manga.

「I didn't ask you to do that.」

Without looking up from her book, Miyagi replied in a displeased voice.

「I know you didn't, but let's just take a break from studying for now.」

「What do you think I'm doing?」

She was right.

She wasn't just immersed in a manga; she was sprawled on her bed, embodying the very definition of "taking a break".

「I can see that, but that's not what I meant. I was thinking more along the lines of stopping for a snack.」

Miyagi didn't budge despite my suggestion.

In that case, it seemed like it was time to resort to force.

I placed my shopping bag on the floor and snatched the book that Miyagi was reading out of her hands. It was my first time seeing this title.

When she said she went shopping, was she talking about this?

Perhaps one of the things she and Utsunomiya had gone shopping for yesterday was manga.

「Why don't you just go and eat it by yourself, Sendai-san?」

Miyagi said as she reclaimed the manga from me and laid back down on her bed. Her apparent lack of motivation and her indifferent attitude made it evident that she wasn't in a good mood.

「Oh, I get what this is about. I'm guessing you don't really like French toast?」

Earlier, I had chosen to go shopping for ingredients by myself, ignoring Miyagi's words when she strictly told me not to go.

I knew this was likely the reason for her bad mood, but I pretended not to and instead, came up with some other random reason.

「…」

Miyagi didn't even bother sparing a glance at me.

「Why are you so quiet all of a sudden?」

「… I've never had it before, so I wouldn't know.」

「Oh, so there really are people like that, huh.」

I wasn't trying to make fun of her.

I was genuinely surprised.

However, Miyagi didn't seem to take it that way, and she replied in a subdued voice.

「I'm not going to eat any.」

「Don't be like that. Look, I'll teach you how to make it, so come lend me a hand.」

「Go make it yourself, Sendai-san.」

「Just consider it as an extracurricular lesson.」

「You're always so quick to come up with such random, thoughtless excuses.」

Miyagi remarked as she rose from the bed, wearing a displeased expression.

「Fine, then I'll bring it over to you when it's finished, so just wait here. I'm going to borrow your kitchen.」

I wasn't going to push it any further.

I had no problems with making French toast even without Miyagi's help. In fact, I'd probably get it done faster on my own.

As I turned away from her and tried to leave the room, I felt her tugging at the hem of my t-shirt.

「What is it?」

「I'll come with you.」

I didn't know how she acted around other people, but when she was with me, Miyagi was never completely honest. She threw her usual tantrum today, but eventually agreed to join me in the kitchen. Despite saying she wouldn't eat any earlier, it was likely she'd end up having some.

If things were going to turn out like this anyway, you should've just come with me without arguing.

Seriously, she could be such a pain sometimes.

But whenever we talked like this, it felt like both of us were being our usual selves again. It felt more genuine than when we were studying together.

We walked down the hallway towards the kitchen. However, instead of entering the kitchen with me, Miyagi went to take a seat at the counter table in the living room.

「Over here, Miyagi.」

I called out to Miyagi, who seemed to have no intention of helping me.

「Why?」

「Didn't you come to help?」

「No. Go do everything yourself, Sendai-san.」

「Come on, lend me a hand here. Even if you can't cook, you can at least whisk some eggs, right? Or do you not know how to do that either?」

While grabbing the milk and eggs from the shopping bag, I noticed a frown on Miyagi's face as I glanced at her.

「That's all you need me to do, right?」

Miyagi replied in a rude tone before coming over to the kitchen.

「Can I use your kitchenware?」

「Yeah, use whatever you want.」

I took out whatever I needed and cracked an egg into a bowl.

「Can you whisk this for me?」

I asked as I handed Miyagi the bowl and a pair of chopsticks. As I did so, I suddenly realized something important.

I forgot to buy the butter needed for baking the bread.

I went over to her fridge and gave it a quick look. Inside, I found a block of discolored butter that appeared to be on its last legs. When I asked about when she had bought it, Miyagi responded

vaguely, saying, “I got it a while back.” However, despite it being “just a while ago,” the butter didn’t seem to have much life left in it.

Nonetheless, I chose to trust Miyagi’s words and provided her with the following instructions:

「Add a tablespoon of sugar and then mix it with the milk.」

I handed Miyagi the container of sugar and a pre-measured cup of milk, then proceeded to lay out the slices of bread on the cutting board.

I guess I could just split each of the slices in half.

Normally, it would have been more convenient to eat if the slices were cut into four quarters, but today I chose to halve them, and I reached for the knife. As I began cutting the first slice of bread, I glanced over at Miyagi, who was in the process of adding sugar to the mix.

「Miyagi, stop right there.」

「What?」

「Aren’t you adding way too much sugar? How many tablespoons did you put in?」

「About three?」

「Didn’t I tell you to put only one in?」

「Well, the sweeter the better, right?」

「No, not at all. It needs to be in proportion to the serving size.」

Two tablespoons could’ve been tolerable, but three was too much.

However, as there was no way to remove the sugar that had already been added, I decided to increase the number of eggs to balance it out and cracked another one into the bowl. When I doubled the amount of milk to blend it with the egg mixture, Miyagi attempted to add more sugar.

「Hey, Miyagi.」

I grabbed her wrist to prevent her from adding more sugar. It looked like she was about to add so much sugar that it might give me heartburn.

「Look, you can give me some orders later, but for the time being, I need you to follow my instructions.」

「I don't have anything to order you to do.」

「I'm sure you can think of something.」

「Okay, in that case, drink that.」

Miyagi said as she pointed towards the egg mixture that was filled with sugar.

「Are you stupid?」

Even if I was okay with the amount of sugar in it, the egg mixture was used for baking bread, not for drinking as it is.

「See? I told you, I don't have anything to order you to do. How about you give me an order for a change, Sendai-san? I'll let you do it as a token of gratitude making us French toast.」

「So you're saying I should order you to add the correct amount of sugar, and that's it? Where's the point in that?」

「Fine, then I'll let you issue me three orders. With this, you'll be able to make your French toast in peace, right?」

So you were planning to continue getting in the way?

If Miyagi wasn't going to listen to me unless I issued her an order, then it was probably better to handle everything on my own instead of getting her to help.

「Three orders, huh. What are you, some kind of genie?」

I took the bowl from Miyagi's hands and started whisking the egg mixture.

「Are you stupid, Sendai-san? Genies don't take orders, they grant wishes.」

Just as I thought, Miyagi really was quite the idiot.

Despite her offer to grant me the authority to issue three orders, I highly doubted that Miyagi would truly regard them as orders. I didn't have much confidence that she would obediently follow my commands, so my "orders" would likely be more like requests.

Moreover, while genies granted wishes, with Miyagi, my wishes might not necessarily be fulfilled.

「Look, if you actually want to lend me a hand, then stop beating around the bush and just help me already. If you don't want to help, then go sit over there.」

Although it might have been considered impolite, I used my chopsticks to point towards the living room.

However, Miyagi did not move.

「You make up new rules all the time, don't you, Sendai-san?」

「Yeah, and?」

「So hurry up and give me an order.」

Miyagi said as she turned towards me, her words sounding like she was the one giving me an order.

I wasn't convinced.

Why was Miyagi acting so bossy?

Besides, even if I had the power to give her three orders, all I really wanted from Miyagi was to accurately measure the sugar and milk, and then bake the bread on low heat. However, I wasn't eager to entrust those tasks to her either.

Well then, what else can I order her to do?

I looked down at the egg mixture.

What do I want Miyagi to do?

What do I want to do with Miyagi?

A few things came to mind, but they weren't the kind of orders I should be issuing at a time like this.

Is there anything else?

I put my chopsticks down and turned to face Miyagi.

「Can I order you to do anything?」

「Yeah.」

「In that case, don't move.」

「Huh?」

「I said don't move.」

「Okay, but what's next?」

Miyagi stared at me with a puzzled expression on her face. She likely assumed I was going to give orders related to assisting me in making French toast.

「Now, close your eyes.」

「… What are you planning to do?」

Miyagi took half a step back even though I had ordered her not to move.

「Shut up and do as I say.」

「Is that also an order?」

「Yeah, it is. You said you'd follow three of my orders, didn't you?」

Miyagi frowned and shot me a glare. It appeared she was on the verge of complaining or saying something as she called my name, but she abruptly silenced herself and slowly closed her eyes.

'There's no way Miyagi would do as I say.'

At least, that was what I had thought, so I was a little surprised. Considering it should've been obvious what would come next, I had assumed she would respond with more aggression.

I brushed my hand against Miyagi's cheek, who was unusually obedient.

Even as I caressed her with my fingers, she didn't move.

My impure thoughts, which should have been scorched away by the midsummer sun, continued to burn fiercely, and I couldn't restrain myself any longer.

I drew my face closer to hers. With my eyes shut, I leaned in to kiss her, and strangely, it felt like I could see her, which shouldn't have been possible. Then, I firmly pressed my lips against hers.

My heart was beating faster than usual.

I wasn't used to kissing Miyagi to the extent where I could do it without hesitation. Nevertheless, our second – or more precisely, third – kiss still felt incredibly pleasant. The mere sensation of her soft lips was enough to weaken my self-control, like melting butter.

I didn't hate kissing her.

If anything, I wanted to touch her even more.

It was nice being able to do something like this over summer break.

I tried to fool myself into thinking that kissing wasn't really a big deal.

I brushed Miyagi's lips with the tip of my tongue. As I extended my tongue to part her closed lips, Miyagi pressed her hand firmly against my shoulder.

She pushed me more forcefully than I anticipated, separating our lips, but despite that, I leaned in for another kiss.

I gently touched and licked her lips with the tip of my tongue once again.

I didn't go further than that, but Miyagi suddenly bit my lips without warning. This time, I was the one to push her away in response to the pain.

It hurt.

When I touched my lips with my fingertips, they felt wet. Looking at my fingers, I saw something red on them.

「It's not like this is the first time we've kissed or anything. You didn't have to go that far.」

「It doesn't matter if it was our first kiss or not. I only granted you the right to issue three orders, so don't be selfish.」

Miyagi said with a displeased tone in her voice.

When she mentioned "selfish," I wasn't sure if she meant when I attempted to slide my tongue into her mouth or when I licked her lips. Nonetheless, she didn't resist when I kissed her, so at least the act of kissing itself shouldn't be deemed "selfish."

「And you need to learn how to hold back a little.」

I said, being careful to say only what was necessary. There were many things on my mind, but if I expressed them, I knew Miyagi would just respond with complaints.

「Do you have a mirror anywhere?」

I asked, concerned about how deep the wound was, all the while not knowing what might trigger the volatile Miyagi.

There didn't seem to be much blood, but my lips felt sore. Miyagi must've been out of her mind to bite me as hard as she did.

「I'll take a look at it for you.」

「It's okay, I just want to see it for myself.」

「Well, there aren't any mirrors in here.」

Miyagi said as she brought her face closer to mine.

Very close.

In fact, she was way too close for merely examining my wound. Just as I was about to ask what she was doing, Miyagi licked my lips like a dog or a cat would.

It was so sudden, I reflexively pushed Miyagi away.

「I disinfected it for you.」

Miyagi offered an excuse as she backed away from me.

「Blood doesn't really taste that great.」

「Well, of course it doesn't. Also, like I said before, licking a wound isn't going to disinfect it, you know.」

I had licked Miyagi's blood before, so I was familiar with its taste.

Miyagi's blood was no more palatable than mine, and I'm sure she knew that even before she licked my lips. It wasn't hygienic, and it wasn't something she particularly liked doing. So, I was confused as to why she had licked my blood, and why she was drawing closer once again.

「Wait, Miyagi.」

I stopped Miyagi from getting any closer, preventing our lips from coming together.

Why did I stop her?

I found myself unable to answer that question as I held onto Miyagi's shoulder.

「Even though you're the one who invited me first, Sendai-san.」

If I invite her, then I should also be prepared for her to accept.

I was surprised that Miyagi's words implied that.

While it was true I had been trying to tempt Miyagi, I never thought she would say something like that.

「… Does that mean you want me to kiss you again?」

I asked, but was met with no response.

When I tried to close the distance between us, Miyagi softly said, "I'll do it," before pressing her lips against mine.

I could feel the vivid sensation of Miyagi's lips against mine, accompanied by a slight sensation of pain.

They felt soft, warm, and pleasant.

Miyagi was more compliant when it came to simply pressing our lips together, and our kiss lasted a bit longer than the previous ones before she parted her lips.

「… You're quite erotic, aren't you, Sendai-san?」

Miyagi grumbled as she glared at me with a look of resentment in her eyes.

「You wanted to kiss me too, didn't you, Miyagi? We're the same.」

「We're not the same.」

Miyagi retorted, but she didn't deny the fact that she wanted to kiss me. Then, she reached her hand out towards me and stroked the wound on my lips with her fingertip.

「That kind of hurts.」

In response to my words, Miyagi applied more pressure to the wound with her fingertip, causing me to wince from the stinging pain.

In terms of physical distance, Miyagi and I were closer than ever before. However, there was a distance between us that could never be bridged.

Was Miyagi still interested in seeing my disgusted expression?

She continued to trace my lips with her finger.

I couldn’t help but think that she was, as she continued to cause me discomfort.

Chapter 17

Sendai-san Always Does Things That Are Unnecessary (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 55

Sendai-san's kisses couldn't be passed off as mere jokes.

The same could be said about our first kiss.

If all she did was give me a peck on the lips, it could have been played off as a playful gesture. However, Sendai-san consistently kissed me in a way that left no room for excuses. Just pressing our lips together would have been fine, but she always attempted to take it further.

When Sendai-san's tongue touched my lips, it sent a shiver down my spine and made me feel uneasy.

Her warmth had merged with mine, causing my thoughts to become heated.

Those kinds of kisses crossed a line in our relationship, so I had to bite Sendai-san's lips to put an end to it. Her serious kisses were unacceptable because they threatened to unearth the buried emotions within me.

The wound I inflicted on Sendai-san's lips turned out to be deeper than I expected, but she had brought it upon herself.

I increased the pressure with the fingers I used to press down on her wound.

Sendai-san's expression contorted, and she shot me a glare, though she attempted to conceal the pain in her face.

It had been a while since I had seen Sendai-san look at me with such defiance.

Whenever I saw Sendai-san with that expression in my room, I felt a sense of superiority, much like when I acquire a rare item. It excited me to know that I was the only one who could make her wear such an expression.

—— Or at least, that was how I felt up until recently.

But right now, there was a part of me that didn't want Sendai-san to look at me with a disapproving expression on her face.

This was strange.

Sendai-san was the one who tried to push for a deeper kiss, so I should have every right to dish out a little pay back. It shouldn't matter what sort of look she had on her face.

I pressed my fingernail into her wound.

Sendai-san grabbed me by the wrist, my fingertip now tinged with a bit of her blood.

「I told you, that hurts.」

She said as she forcefully tore my hand away from her wound.

As I inspected my fingertip, I noticed Sendai-san's blood on it, the same blood that had been on her lips. When I licked the blood from my finger, it had the same taste as when I kissed Sendai-san, and it wasn't particularly pleasant.

「Don't lick that. Go wash your hands.」

Sendai-san said as she tried to turn the tap on in the sink, but I quickly grabbed her by the arm to stop her.

「I'll wash my hands later.」

「Then what are you planning to do right now?」

Sendai-san seemed to be getting carried away this summer.

Even when I tried to initiate the kiss, she kept kissing me as if

it were more natural that way. I didn't mind being kissed, but I had an issue with Sendai-san acting like she pleased all the time.

This was my home, and now that I had fulfilled her three commands, I should be allowed to do whatever I want with her.

「I'll kiss you.」

I had no intention of waiting for Sendai-san's reply.

I took a step closer to her and leaned in, bringing my face closer to hers.

She didn't close her eyes.

Sendai-san's face drew nearer in my field of vision. She maintained her gaze for a moment longer before finally deciding to yield and closed her eyes. Then, I pressed my lips against hers.

I could sense her warmth, along with a wetness – likely blood – through her lips.

The wetness from her lips was somewhat unpleasant, but the contact with mine felt pleasurable, just like when she had kissed me. As I pressed my lips more firmly against hers, Sendai-san pulled back slightly, likely because of the pain from her wound.

There shouldn't be any difference in the softness of the lips, regardless of where they touched on the body, but when our lips met, it sent my heart racing and my body heating up.

I wasn't sure if I'd feel this way with someone else.

I didn't even want to find out.

The only thing I was certain of right now was how I felt while kissing Sendai-san.

I tugged at her T-shirt, pressing my lips more firmly against hers. There was more blood on her lips than before, and they felt even softer against mine. However, Sendai-san soon broke the kiss.

「Be a bit gentler. I already told you, my lips hurt. Also, you're going to stretch my t-shirt out, so let go.」

Sendai-san said as she smacked the back of my hand.

Without uttering a word, I headed to the sink to wash my hands before resuming my task of whisking the eggs. Sendai-san didn't comment on my silence and continued cutting the bread. The kitchen was now filled with the rhythmic sound of chopsticks striking the bowl.

My heart was still pounding a little bit.

The only thing in my line of sight now was a bowl of yellow liquid. However, as if unable to stand the silence, I decided to ask:

「What should I do with this now?」

I wasn't sure how the mixture was going to be used.

「I think that's good enough. All that's left is to pour that over the bread and bake it, so you can take a seat and wait over there, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san kicked me out to the living room, even though she was the one who had asked me for my help earlier.

How irresponsible.

I had a few complaints about being kicked out after being forced to help, but I also felt uncomfortable staying in the kitchen. Besides, it would be a hassle if she asked me to help her bake the bread.

I decided to listen to Sendai-san's instructions and left the kitchen.

While waiting at the counter table, I heard sizzling bread and caught a whiff of the sweet scent of French toast. Despite not being very hungry, my stomach stirred. Leaning closer, I noticed slices of bread with crispy crusts. It seemed like an eternity, but eventually, the French toast was served.

「I'm not sure how it'll taste thanks to someone not following my instructions earlier, but here, give it a try.」

Sendai-san placed a knife and a fork in front of me and took a seat beside me. Although we didn't say it at the same time, we both clapped our hands together and said, "Let's eat." During that moment, our eyes met briefly.

I sliced the bread, and a small piece – resembling tamagoyaki – made its way to my mouth. The crispy outer layer and the soft interior combined to create a nostalgic flavor of eggs and butter.

「So, what do you think after trying French toast for the first time?」

Sendai-san asked while staring at me.

「It's a lot sweeter than I imagined.」

「That's your own fault. You did add a ridiculous amount of sugar.」

Sendai-san said with a dissatisfied tone in her voice.

「Well, I guess it tastes pretty good.」

Those were my honest thoughts.

While it tasted a bit sweeter than I expected, I would consider French toast as one of my favorite foods now.

Just like the karaage and tamagoyaki, the food Sendai-san made was delicious. Maybe she had the ability to make even the things I didn't like taste good.

「I'm glad to hear that.」

She said, sounding relieved.

Every time Sendai-san prepared a meal for me, she would react this way when I expressed how delicious it was. While my opinions shouldn't concern her, it appeared that she cared about my thoughts.

I savored another bite of the French toast. While I chewed on the fluffy bread and swallowed, I heard the distinct sound of utensils clinking against the plate. Glancing to my side, I found Sendai-san

with her hand over her mouth.

「Are you okay?」

I knew immediately why she was covering her mouth.

The French toast must've brushed against her wound.

At least, that was probably what happened, but considering Sendai-san was the one who deserved it, there was no need for me to be concerned. However, she looked like she was in so much pain that I couldn't help but ask if she was okay.

「Stop biting me so hard to the point where it causes bleeding.」

Sendai-san glared at me with her brows furrowed.

「It's your fault for doing things that make me bite you so hard.」

「It's not like you hate it when we kiss, though.」

「I never said I liked it either.」

「Really now.」

Sendai-san's voice and eyes seemed like they were filled with doubt.

I took another bite of the French toast, attempting to drown out her voice and avoid her gaze. I chewed it slowly, savoring the buttery taste until it faded, and then I expressed what was on my mind to Sendai-san.

「Starting from the day after tomorrow, act a bit more normal.」

「What do you mean by "normal"?」

「Don't do anything strange anymore.」

Just as Sendai-san said, I didn't hate being kissed, and I was fine with kissing her too.

But it wasn't something we should be doing.

Our relationship wasn't the type where we should be kissing each other, and I had no intention of changing that. Just because things had taken a different turn at the start of summer vacation didn't mean our relationship would remain the same when the second semester began. It was more likely that we'd return to our previous routine, much like during the first semester.

Moreover, I had a feeling that if we kept going like this, we might not be able to stop. My lack of confidence stemmed from the fact that I didn't dislike it, and it made it hard for me to behave as I normally would.

I had a feeling that if we continued down this path, something bad would end up happening.

「And what do you mean by "strange"?」

Sendai-san asked as she poked at her French toast with her fork.

「I don't know. Just stop doing weird things.」

「Don't beat around the bush. You're telling me not to kiss you anymore, right?」

「If you already knew what I was going to say, then don't ask. Look, if we have to do something together, we could study or have some conversations. And if that doesn't interest you, we could pass the time by reading books or playing games together.」

I said firmly as I snatched a slice of French toast from Sendai-san's plate. Taking a bite, I heard Sendai-san smile and say,

「You know, doing things like that makes us sound like we're friends, Miyagi.」

Her artificially cheerful voice filled the living room. Then, Sendai-san rose from her seat and said, "I'll get us something to drink," as she made her way to the kitchen.

「Well, if that's the kind of friendship you want, then sure, I

guess we can try that starting the day after tomorrow.」

She said as she returned to the table with two cups in her hand before placing them down.

「I never said I wanted us to be friends or anything.」

「Is that so? When you said to “act a bit more normal,” I thought we could at least pretend to be friends. You know, we could’ve caught a movie together, like what real friends do.」

Sendai-san smiled as she took a sip of her barley tea. It looked just like the same smile she would wear at school.

I could tell from her voice that she wasn’t being serious either.

There’s no way I’d ever go to the movies with you.

That was probably the response Sendai-san was expecting from me.

And that was exactly why I wasn’t going to say it.

「… Alright, fine. Let’s go.」

「To the movies?」

「Yes. Let’s go tomorrow – it’ll be Thursday then.」

Although I wasn’t pretending to be her friend at the time, I once tried treating her like one.

We talked about trivial things and even played a game together.

But in the end, all that did was make me realize that Sendai-san and I could never be real friends.

This time, things might take a different turn. Back then, I was the only one making an effort to treat her like a friend. Now, Sendai-san was also playing along. I wasn’t particularly eager to be friends with her, but it could be the beginning bringing our relationship back on the correct path.

「Why are we going on a Thursday?」

Taken aback by my response, Sendai-san asked, probing for more details.

「Well, if we're going to pretend to be friends, we should probably do it on a day where you're not coming over for a tutoring session.」

「I guess that's true. Okay, Thursday it is then.」

Sendai-san replied while wearing a smile that I had never seen in this house before.

Sendai-san Always Does Things That Are Unnecessary (II)

Part 56

No, not that one. Not this one either.

Although I had just spent the last thirty minutes pulling clothes out of my wardrobe and arranging them on my bed, I still couldn't decide what to wear.

I knew there wasn't a need to spend this much time trying to decide on an outfit.

Even though we didn't know what movie we were watching yet, Sendai-san and I decided on a meeting place yesterday.

We agreed to hang out at a location that was unfamiliar to both of us – an area rarely visited by our schoolmates – and because of that, we needed to take a train to be able to reach our designated meeting spot.

No one else knew of my after-school relationship with Sendai-san, let alone that we had plans to see each other over summer vacation. To keep it all a secret, we purposely chose an area where we wouldn't run into anyone we knew.

I had to get to the station and then catch a train.

For a simple movie outing, it was quite a lengthy trip. Nevertheless, since our plans were for the afternoon, I still had plenty of time to get there.

「I'll just go with this.」

I picked up a white blouse and a pair of jeans – the same clothes I wore when I met up with Maika and Ami the other day.

There was no need to get all dressed up just because I was going to hang out with Sendai-san.

I should've just picked something random instead of dwelling on it so much.

I quickly changed my clothes and returned the clothes I had pulled from my closet. Contemplating whether to tie my hair or leave it be, I drew the curtains aside. Gazing outside the window, I noticed the sun was exceptionally radiant today.

It looks really hot outside.

Worried about potential sunburn on my neck, I applied sunscreen and decided to leave my hair down. Glancing at the clock, I realized it was still a bit early to head out.

I let out a sigh.

Sendai-san probably wasn't being serious when she suggested watching a movie together, so I couldn't help but feel a bit disheartened. I did have a movie in mind that I wanted to watch, but I wasn't sure if Sendai-san would be interested. Likewise, if she had a specific movie in mind, I wasn't certain I'd be interested in it either.

There were probably many things about Sendai-san that her friends knew but I didn't.

Like her favorite movies, music preferences, or her favorite foods.

I heaved another sigh before gently smacking my cheeks.

We're only "pretending" to be friends for today.

It's not a big deal.

I just had to approach this hangout with Sendai-san as I would with Maika. Even if our movie preferences differed, we could always reach a compromise, just as I'd done with Maika and other people when our tastes didn't match.

「I'm going to be a little early, but that's fine.」

I grabbed my bag and left my apartment.

In less than ten minutes of being outside, my sweat had already started dampening my shirt. The chirping of the cicadas, combined with the sounds of passing cars, made it feel even hotter than it actually was, and frankly, it was quite annoying.

As soon as I entered the station building, I stopped in my tracks.

Now that I thought about it, Sendai-san's home wasn't far from mine. Since we were both headed for the same place, there was a possibility we might end up on the same train.

I wasn't going to go out of my way to search for her, but I ended up looking around a bit anyway.

There's no way she'd be here.

I went through the ticket gate and boarded a train I wasn't used to taking. Both the platform and the air-conditioned train were devoid of any familiar faces.

I disembarked from the train after a few stations and made my way to a peculiar-looking statue – our designated meeting point. But before I reached the statue, I spotted Sendai-san already waiting there.

Although the clothes she wore and the aura she exuded were different from the usual Sendai-san I'd see in my room, I could tell it was her even from a distance.

She was wearing a sleeveless shirt and a long skirt, which was a fairly common outfit. Yet, it suited her remarkably well and, combined with her good looks, made her stand out.

I wasn't the type to approach someone I knew if we didn't have any prior arrangement, and even though I had plans with Sendai-san, it was still challenging to call out to her. Even if we were in the same class this year, I doubted we'd get along since we didn't belong to the same social circles. Right now, Sendai-san looked just as I had imagined her during our second year, before we started talking.

However, I had no choice but to call her out to her.

Suppressing a sigh, I moved three steps closer to Sendai-san, and our gazes met. Before I could reach her, she approached me, waving her hand and calling out my name.

「Sorry, did I make you wait long?」

It wasn't like I was late or anything. There was still plenty of time before our agreed meeting time, so there was no need to apologize. However, if we were friends, I felt it was only proper to apologize.

「No, I came straight from prep school today, so I got here a bit early.」

I wasn't sure how long she'd been waiting, but Sendai-san smiled and told me not to worry. Then, she looked me up and down and said,

「Miyagi, you look pretty much the same as when you're at home.」

「There's no need for me to change things up.」

「I see.」

「Do you always dress up like this, Sendai-san?」

She appeared somewhat different from the last time I saw her with Ibaraki-san, but I couldn't be certain because we were quite far apart.

I was a bit curious, so I decided to ask about it, though I didn't think too much of it as it was common for people to dress differently on different days. But for some reason, she pinched her skirt and, with a serious expression, asked,

「Yeah, I do. Why, do I look weird?」

「No, I was just wondering.」

「I see. Anyway, shall we get going?」

Sendai-san's skirt swayed gently as she started walking.

Naturally, our destination was the movie theater. We walked through the station building and got on an elevator. After ascending a few floors and disembarking, my gaze was drawn to several posters adorning the walls.

「Do you have a specific movie you want to watch in mind?」

Sendai-san asked as she glanced at the posters.

「Kind of.」

「Oh, you actually do. What's it called?」

I told her the title of the movie, which was an adaptation of one of the romance manga series I had at home.

「Oh, that one? Umina said she wanted to watch it too.」

「Ibaraki-san did?」

「Yeah, she really likes the actor who plays the male lead.」

「I see.」

I mumbled, and before I could follow up by asking, "Do you like him too, Sendai-san?" I swallowed those words and chose to ask a more appropriate question instead.

「Was there a movie that you wanted to see, Sendai-san?」

「Yeah.」

She replied, following up with the title of her preferred movie – a title I least wanted to hear.

「You really want to watch that?」

「I mean, it's perfect for summer. Are you okay with watching a horror movie, Miyagi?」

To be honest, I wasn't okay with it at all.

The movie Sendai-san suggested was a B-horror film set in a

school. It surprised me because she didn't strike me as someone who'd enjoy that genre. Personally, I was the type who wouldn't even consider watching a trailer for a horror movie.

If that was the kind of movie we were going to watch today, I felt like turning around and going home immediately. But at the same time, I didn't want Sendai-san to tease me for not wanting to watch it either.

「…」

「Wait, are you not good with horror?」

Sendai-san asked, noticing my silence.

「I didn't say that. I just want to watch a different movie today.」

「Oh, I know. I bet you're the type who'd be too afraid to go to the bathroom at night because you're afraid you might encounter a ghost in there.」

「No, I'm not.」

「Well, if you aren't, then how about we catch that horror movie?」

There was a hint of amusement in her voice as she spoke.

Given the current situation, I was certainly not eager to admit that I had no desire to watch it. But it'd also be problematic if we did end up seeing it.

「… I'm not afraid of encountering ghosts, but sometimes, I do feel like a hand might pop out of the toilet.」

I also didn't like the thought of anything being behind me.

Even though I was aware that there was nothing behind me, there were times when I felt a sense of unease, especially when I was alone at home. On such nights, I couldn't help but imagine that something eerie might emerge from my toilet at any moment.

「Do your parents get home late or something, Miyagi?」

My father often came home late, and sometimes, he didn't come home at all. But I didn't feel like sharing that with Sendai-san, so I stayed quiet. Then, Sendai-san chuckled and said,

「Okay, okay, let's go see the movie you wanted to watch. It'd be a problem if you couldn't bring yourself to go to the bathroom at night.」

「You're making fun of me, aren't you?」

「No, not at all. I just thought that side of you was a bit cute and childish.」

「So you are making fun of me.」

「I told you, I'm not. Also, I thought you were a fan of stories that had happy endings. If I remember correctly, this one doesn't have one, right?」

The movie I had in mind was a romance film, and in the original manga, the heroine dies at the end. Even though it wasn't a happy ending, the main character did end up with the boy she loved, so it didn't leave a bitter taste.

But right now, I was more focused on Sendai-san's memory than on how the series concluded.

I recalled mentioning that I found romance manga with unhappy endings uninteresting, but I had only said it once.

「You sure have a good memory.」

「That's because I was a little bitter after you spoiled me on the ending.」

Sendai-san spoke in a tone that was difficult to tell if she was joking or being serious.

「Yet, you read the whole series anyway.」

「Yeah, I guess I did. So you're willing to watch movies that don't have happy endings?」

「Even if it didn't end on a happy note, I still liked it.」

「Okay, then let's go buy our tickets.」

Sendai-san said with a smile before turning her back to me.

She seemed to be smiling a lot more than usual today.

Probably because we were "friends."

Even if that was the reason, the sight of a Sendai-san who was so different from yesterday made it hard for me to relax even once the movie started.

Sendai-san Always Does Things That Are Unnecessary (III)

Part 57

It took a little over two hours for the credits to start rolling.

We stayed until the very end of the movie.

Sendai-san, who was sitting beside me, remained in her seat until it was over.

I didn't really connect with people who left the theater before the credits finished rolling, so I was glad that Sendai-san felt the same way. Sometimes, there were post-credits scenes, and I didn't want to miss them.

At first, I had trouble focusing on the movie, but as it went on, I became less conscious of Sendai-san, who sat beside me the whole time.

When watching a movie, there was no need to engage in conversation with the person sitting beside you. All I had to do was concentrate on the screen in front of me. Because of this, I could immerse myself in the story, even if it did take me a while to fully engage with it.

「Did you find the movie interesting, Miyagi?」

Sendai-san asked with a smile on her face as light returned to the inside of the theater.

「Yeah, I did.」

I answered briefly as I got up from my seat.

While the movie adaptation didn't stay entirely faithful to the original story, I found it enjoyable and thought the filmmakers did a good job. However, I had no idea how Sendai-san felt about the movie. I had never asked about her favorite films before, so I wasn't

sure if the story suited her tastes or not.

「What about you, Sendai-san?」

I asked as we walked. Without any change in expression on her face, she replied,

「I enjoyed it too.」

「Really?」

Sendai-san didn't look bored, and it didn't seem like she was lying. However, there was something about her demeanor that bothered me, so I couldn't resist questioning her.

「Yeah, really. I thought it was pretty interesting.」

Sendai-san shared her thoughts on various scenes with enthusiasm, reiterating her interest in the movie before suddenly coming to a halt.

「So what do you want to do now? Want to check out some other places?」

Sendai-san asked as we stood in front of the entrance of the movie theater.

「Like what?」

I hadn't decided on what to do after watching the movie.

Since I didn't have any ideas in mind, I passed the question right back to her.

「We could go look at some clothes or something.」

「I don't think we have the same tastes in fashion.」

「If you want to go, I don't mind looking for clothes that you like, Miyagi.」

「I don't really have any clothes I want to look at.」

For now, I could manage with the clothes in my closet.

There weren't any outfits I wanted to browse, and I didn't really feel like waiting while Sendai-san shopped either.

「Okay, in that case, want to grab something to eat?」

Sendai-san said with a gentle smile on her face.

「Sure, but where are we going?」

「I guess I'd prefer something lighter on the stomach. What do you want to eat?」

「I'll let you decide, Sendai-san.」

「Okay. You like sweet things, right, Miyagi?」

I was fine with having whatever Sendai-san wanted to eat.

That was what I was trying to express by letting her decide where to eat, but for some reason, it didn't seem to come across. Instead, Sendai-san still seemed to be considering my preferences.

That wasn't a bad thing in itself.

If I were with Maika and Ami instead, I would've openly told them what I wanted to eat.

But I didn't feel comfortable telling Sendai-san.

I knew the reason behind my apprehension.

It was because Sendai-san was being insufferably kind while wearing a constant smile on her face.

The Sendai-san by my side right now was no different from the Sendai-san that I always saw at school.

She had a perpetual grin on her face, and her voice maintained a cheerful tone.

The way she was acting right now made it seem as though we had reverted back to the days when we first became second-year classmates, never exchanging a word, and I wasn't even sure if she

was aware of my existence. The impression I had of Sendai-san when I saw her at our meeting spot earlier was accurate.

This was not the Sendai-san I knew.

「Actually, sorry, I think I'm going to pass on eating.」

I said as I changed my mind and started walking towards the train platforms.

「Wait, Miyagi. Where are you going?」

If we were in my room right now, her tone would likely be more dissatisfied, unlike the gentle voice that was currently calling out to me.

It made me feel sick to the stomach.

In fact, I was so nauseated that I felt like I was about to throw up what I ate for lunch, so I began to walk even faster.

「Home.」

I replied without turning back.

「Already? Isn't it a little too soon?」

「No, it's not.」

Being with Sendai-san, who was constantly trying to cater to my preferences, felt dull.

It wasn't fun being around her like this.

「Can I go over to your place then? There's still a lot of time left to hang out today.」

Sendai-san asked as she grabbed onto my arm. When I turned around, I was met with the same old smile plastered on her face.

「I'm okay with not entering your place, but at least let me go with you.」

「Why?」

「“Why?” I mean, even if I don’t go over to your place, we’d still be taking the same train back, right? Plus, we kind of live in the same direction, so we might as well walk home together, especially since we’re pretending to be “friends” today.」

Sendai-san seemed determined to keep up the charade of being “friends” and held onto my arm tightly.

What she said made sense.

Our homes were relatively close to each other, so it wouldn’t be unusual if we went back together. But if that was going to be the case, then it would defeat the purpose in us meeting so far from home.

「You’re not wrong, but it’d be a hassle if we ended up running into anyone we knew.」

「Well, since it’s Obon, everyone’s probably away at their relatives’ houses, so I doubt we’ll run into anyone.」

Sendai-san brushed it off casually as she tugged on my arm.

「Just let me go with you.」

She said as she took the lead and began walking. She dragged me along with her, so I had no choice but to walk next to her.

I found this side of Sendai-san a lot better than the one from a moment ago, when she seemed to lack her own will.

She was acting a bit forceful in order to get her desire across.

While I wasn’t a fan of that sort of attitude either, it was still better than seeing Sendai-san act like a puppet. However, her smile stayed on her face, so I still felt a bit uneasy.

Sendai-san kept talking as we walked.

She didn’t seem to care whether I had anything to say or not. She just continued talking, even as we waited for the train, and she didn’t stop even after we got on the train.

The train made a rhythmic clicking and clacking sound as it moved.

The scenery outside the window flew by, gradually bringing us closer to our homes.

The dazzling city and lush greenery gradually receded into the distance, replaced by a familiar landscape. While I had a certain fondness for Sendai-san's voice, the train's ambient noises drowned out her words.

The two of us got off the train after it arrived at the platform of our station.

When we walked out of the building, we were greeted by the sight of a familiar cityscape, surrounded by tall buildings.

As we walked down the familiar streets together, Sendai-san, someone I never thought I'd walk with again, stayed by my side. However, there was silence between us, and I couldn't imagine a conversation happening throughout the journey back.

I didn't like this kind of atmosphere.

Both my emotions and my voice weighed me down, making it difficult to speak. When I attempted to initiate a conversation, it felt as though an invisible barrier clung to my lips, keeping me from saying anything. I couldn't help but think that being in my company during one of my foul moods like this must have been boring for Sendai-san.

However, she walked next to me the entire time and we never parted ways either.

「So you ended up following me the whole way home anyway…」

As we entered my room, I served Sendai-san a cup of barley tea out of habit and sat beside her, taking a sip of my soda.

「You're not about to chase a "friend" out of your house now, are you?」

「Are we still doing this "pretending to be friends" thing?」

「I thought it was supposed to go on for the entire day.」

Sendai-san said with a smile on her face as she leaned her back against my bed.

She was still trying to act like a nice person, but it felt unpleasant to me.

Sendai-san must've realized that there was no point in pretending to be friends anymore. No matter how much we faked it, pretending was just pretending in the end – it would never become reality.

「Sendai-san, did you really find the movie we just watched interesting? If you insist that we're "friends," then be honest with me.」

I didn't really care what she thought of the movie, but I didn't want to be lied to. There was no point in continuing our fake friendship, but if that's what she wanted to call us, then she should at least be able to answer this.

I stared at Sendai-san.

She had been talking up until a moment ago, but now, all she could do was let out a sigh.

「… I knew it was supposed to be a tearjerker, so I was kind of curious about how it'd turn out, but I think the manga was a lot better.」

Sendai-san responded in a gentle voice without making eye contact.

Sendai-san Always Does Things That Are Unnecessary (IV)

Part 58

「Is that good enough?」

Sendai-san asked as she smiled at me.

Our tastes in movies were different.

It wasn't uncommon to have our differences. It was like this with Maika and the others as well, so it wasn't really an issue.

The real problem was with Sendai-san's attitude.

Sendai-san – who still had a smile plastered on her face – felt distant.

「Yeah, I don't think we could ever be friends.」

I finally voiced the thoughts that had been lingering in my mind all day.

At first, I thought that by engaging in activities with her that typical friends do, even if we couldn't ultimately become friends, we could at least mend our deteriorating relationship. But it was merely wishful thinking.

It wasn't fun being around Sendai-san whenever she tried to treat me like a friend, and I didn't want to be around her whenever she was acting like this, even if it did mean being able to repair our strained relationship. However, she persisted with her futile efforts.

「It's only been half a day and you've already come to that conclusion?」

Sendai-san asked with a composed tone as she sipped on her barley tea.

「Nothing's going to change no matter how many hours we spend with each other.」

「So, what are you unhappy about?」

「Everything. Everything about you right now is grossing me out, Sendai-san.」

「Well, you didn't have to put it like that.」

Sendai-san let out a deep sigh as she set her cup down on the table.

「You were the one who wanted us to act like friends, so I was just listening to your request, Miyagi.」

「I didn't request anything.」

「You invited me to the movies, didn't you? That's basically a request.」

「But Sendai-san, you were the one who suggested we go and watch a movie together.」

「And you were the one who said you wanted to go.」

Sendai-san, sounding somewhat offended, said before flopping down onto the bed. She wasn't entirely sprawled out, but her manners were a little lacking. I was also concerned that her skirt would get wrinkled.

「Sendai-san, you shouldn't roll around on other people's beds. Your skirt might get flipped up.」

「That won't happen as long as you don't do anything strange.」

She responded half-heartedly as she bumped her arm into me. While it was somewhat bothersome, her arm stayed motionless against my shoulder. I reached out and took hold of her dangling arm.

Even though she was wearing a sleeveless shirt, her arms were surprisingly not tanned at all. It was hard to believe that she

walked to my apartment under the blazing sun three days a week. While gazing at the tips of her lovely, pale arms, I noticed that her nails were subtly decorated, although it wasn't very conspicuous.

I placed my hand on Sendai-san's shoulder, curious if she'd react with her usual complaints or displeasure whenever I touched her. Slowly, I ran my fingertips from her upper arm down to her wrist, stealing a glance at her as I did so. However, Sendai-san remained quiet and appeared unfazed.

I brought my face closer to the area right above her wrist.

When I pressed my lips against her skin, I felt a hand pushing my head away.

「I thought I told you not to do anything weird.」

Sendai-san said, sounding dissatisfied as she glared at me.

Now this was the Sendai-san that I knew.

As I thought, I found this side of Sendai-san the most appealing – undoubtedly so. Yet, for some reason, her displeased expression felt like a needle pricking my body. I tightened my grip on her arm, as if I were clinging to her.

「All I'm doing is touching you. That much is fine, isn't it?」

I asked nonchalantly.

「Touching me? That was a kiss just now, wasn't it? Do you usually do this with your friends?」

「I don't, but you're not my friend. Also, we're done pretending to be friends.」

We spent a lot of time together, and now we were even meeting on our days off.

We'd also engage in casual conversations multiple times a week, so it wouldn't have been strange if we actually became friends. However, I wasn't sure if it was because we didn't start off on the right foot or if it was because of the activities we did together, but in any case, there was no scenario where I could truly

consider Sendai-san my friend.

I tried to press my lips against Sendai-san's arm once again. However, before I could manage to do so, she tugged on my hair.

「Hey, just because we're not friends doesn't mean you can do whatever you want, you know.」

Sendai-san stated firmly as she flicked my forehead. The overly calm and kind side of her had completely disappeared.

「Well, it'll be fine as long as you give me permission to do whatever I want, right?」

To be honest, I was lying about it being fine.

Letting things fester like this wouldn't lead to anything good, but even though I was aware of that, I couldn't resist the urge to touch Sendai-san.

Moreover, none of this would've happened if Sendai-san had gone home when I asked her to. It was all because she chose to accompany me to my place as if it were the most natural thing, that it had come to this.

Instead of heaving a sigh, I sank my teeth into her arm.

「Miyagi, that hurts.」

I didn't bite her that hard.

However, after exaggerating the pain, Sendai-san followed up with, "I never said you could do whatever you wanted."

「Well, in that case, hurry up and give me permission.」

「You don't have the right to order me around today.」

Sendai-san muttered as she sat herself up and leaned against the headboard of the bed while stroking the bite mark.

「So if I did have the right to give you orders, you'd let me?」

I was well aware of what I needed to do to gain the authority of giving her orders.

I got up, took my wallet from my bag, and pulled out a five-thousand-yen bill before giving it to Sendai-san.

「I just need to give you this, right? Now follow my orders.」

「A five-thousand-yen bill isn't always going to solve everything. Besides, you've already paid me this week.」

「That was payment for your tutoring services. This is for the order I'm about to give you.」

I tried to force her to take the five-thousand-yen bill, but she appeared unconvinced and refused to accept it. Instead, she kicked my leg and firmly stated, "I don't want it."

With nowhere else for it to go, I put the bill on my bed before taking a seat next to her.

「Sendai-san. Do as I say.」

None of the rules we had established covered this situation, so she had every right to refuse. The reality was, Sendai-san hadn't accepted the five-thousand-yen bill from me. It lay on the bed, nestled between me and Sendai-san.

It was probably impossible to convince her.

Just when I was on the verge of giving up and reaching for the bill, I heard Sendai-san let out a deep sigh as she brought her feet to the floor.

「—— Look, I'm not saying you can do whatever you want to me, but if you really want to touch me that badly, then just do it.」

There was a tone of resignation in her voice as she turned to me.

She hadn't specified where or how I could touch her.

I gently caressed her cheek.

She didn't object or express any dislike. I gently stroked her chin with my fingertips and did the same to her lips. When I moved my face closer to hers, she didn't complain, so I pressed my lips against hers.

After a brief, fleeting kiss, we quickly pulled away. When I glanced at Sendai-san, no longer able to sense the softness and warmth of her lips, I heard her express her dissatisfaction.

「I don't think you could call this "touching" anymore.」

「You never said I had to touch you with my hands, right?」

「You're so annoying.」

Despite her irritated tone, Sendai-san remained seated and didn't distance herself. She simply stayed on the bed.

So, I took the opportunity to press my lips against hers once again.

She wasn't my friend, so it didn't really matter if I kissed her.

Perhaps this was a bit of a logical fallacy, but given that Sendai-san had kissed me multiple times before, I don't believe she has any right to complain. Moreover, if she didn't like it, she could simply walk away.

I went for a longer kiss than before. This time, I could distinctly feel the sensation of her lips against mine.

Sendai-san – who was closer to me than anyone else has ever been – had lips as soft as they had been a few days ago.

Our lips stayed connected.

I didn't know how something so simple could bring such pleasure, and it was only intensifying my desire to be even closer to her – to experience more of her.

I wanted just a little more.

I grabbed Sendai-san's hand and pressed my lips against hers with more intensity than before. As I began to sense her warmth

more vividly than the softness of her lips, we parted, and she hit me on the head with a pillow.

「Can't I be the one doing this to you instead?」

Sendai-san asked, staring at me as she hugged the pillow.

「No, because you always end up doing something unnecessary, Sendai-san.」

If all we were doing was simply kissing, that would be fine, but it was never the case whenever Sendai-san initiated them. Even if I issued an order, she always seemed to push for more.

Actually, she shouldn't have been asking something like that in the first place.

All she should be doing is rejecting me.

If we wanted to enjoy the remaining time of our summer vacation in peace, then that's what she should have done. Instead, Sendai-san posed her question as if kissing had become a routine part of our daily lives.

「So you're saying it's fine as long as I don't do anything unnecessary.」

「Not today.」

「"Not today," you say. Does that mean there are days when I can?」

「You talk too much, Sendai-san.」

I leaned in as if to silence Sendai-san's incessant, unnecessary chatter with a kiss.

"Miyagi," Sendai-san said, calling out my name.

However, I kissed her without saying another word.

Volume 2 Interlude

What Miyagi Did To Me On a Rainy Day

(Sendai PoV)
Part 58-extra

The weather forecast had predicted it would be cloudy today.

I stood at the entrance of the school, umbrella in hand, looking out. Weather forecasts were, after all, just predictions, and they weren't always accurate. So, I wasn't surprised to see it raining. The rainy season wasn't over yet, and rain after a cloudy forecast wasn't unusual. I had brought a folding umbrella just in case, so it wasn't an issue.

□□ Or at least, that should've been the case.

Even with an umbrella in hand, I didn't want to leave the school grounds.

The weather outside the school entrance felt like an entirely different world compared to indoors. Earlier, when I was waiting for Umina, who had been called in by a teacher, the rain began pouring down relentlessly, as if it had a vendetta. An umbrella seemed useless in this downpour, so I hesitated to leave the school, knowing I'd be drenched instantly. Meanwhile, Mariko had already been picked up by her parents in their car, and Umina, who had met up with her boyfriend with an umbrella, would likely get soaked too.

「What should I do…」

It would have been fine if I was going straight home; I could just take a shower and change clothes, no matter how soaked I got. But I was supposed to go to Miyagi's place today. I knew if I asked, she'd let me use her bathroom and lend me some clothes, but I didn't want to. There was no way she'd let me borrow anything without it turning into some kind of strange order.

After a moment of hesitation, I pulled out my phone.

Just as I was about to text her that I couldn't make it today because of the rain, I stopped.

It was Miyagi's job to send the first message, not mine.

It was hard to decide which was more comforting: returning to an empty house where no one acknowledged my presence, or going to Miyagi's place, where, despite her indifferent attitude, she still offered me barley tea.

'I suppose getting soaked by the rain isn't that big of a deal,' I thought to myself.

Deciding I would worry about the change of clothes once I arrived at Miyagi's place, I put my phone away, grabbed my umbrella, and headed out. As expected, the umbrella barely helped. The rain wasn't exactly torrential, but it was enough to drench me and make me reluctant to keep walking.

The rain was incredibly relentless.

But my feet didn't lead me towards my own house. Instead, I quickened my pace and headed towards Miyagi's place—the sort of place where someone like her might tie my hands with a necktie and command me to lick her feet. I didn't mind following her orders, but I couldn't understand why I was so determined to reach her place, even in this pouring rain.

In the seemingly unending rain, I drew closer and closer to Miyagi's apartment.

I was shivering in my uniform.

Even though it was July, my soaked clothes made it feel like summer was still a long way off.

Lately, our relationship has been heading down a dangerous path.

If we wanted to turn back, now would be the time.

There was still a chance to do it.

But despite thinking that, my feet didn't slow down.

Before I realized it, I was standing in front of Miyagi's apartment. I shut my umbrella and pressed the intercom button, as if I had done it a thousand times before. Miyagi, sounding irritated, buzzed me in, and I stepped into the elevator. The wet fabric of my blouse clung uncomfortably to my skin. Stifling a sigh, I exited on the sixth floor and walked to Miyagi's door, where her flat, emotionless voice greeted me.

「Did you not bring an umbrella with you?」

「What does it look like? Sorry, but can I ask you for a towel?」

「Well, just come inside for the time being.」

Miyagi said as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

「Aren't I just going to get everything in your house wet?」

Anyone who looked at me could see that I was completely drenched. If I took off my shoes and took even a single step, I'd leave a wet footprint in her hallway. Walking to her room would create a trail of footprints, and water would drip from my uniform. Even if I dried off with a towel, the hallway might still get wet, but it was better than doing nothing.

「It's fine. Even if the floor gets wet, I'll just wipe it later.」

Miyagi said with a serious tone in her voice as she looked at me.

「That doesn't sound fine to me. Just lend me a towel.」

「I'll get you a towel and a change of clothes. You can get changed right here.」

「You want me to do it right here?」

「Yep. There's no one else here but me anyway, and no one is coming home anytime soon either, so you don't need to worry about that. Besides, you're not going to be able to dry your clothes with just a towel anyway, and if you entered the rest of the apartment,

you're just going to get everything all wet.」

She had a point.

A towel was only going to be a temporary solution. I could dry my arms and legs, but my uniform was so drenched that wiping it wouldn't do much good. At most, the towel would only be useful for wiping away any footprints from the floor.

I knew she had a point, but I still didn't want to listen to her.

I was standing in the entrance of Miyagi's apartment, and the front door was not the place to undress myself. Even though no one else was home or coming back, Miyagi was still here, and I'd be taking off my clothes right in front of her, with her watching me.

If Miyagi wanted me to feel comfortable changing here, she could have said something like, "I'll wait for you in my room," or, "I'll go somewhere else." But she didn't, and it was probably intentional. It seemed like Miyagi was determined to stay here, so I was reluctant to follow her instructions.

「You know, I'm not sure I'm keen on the idea of undressing by the entranceway.」

I said, hoping to deflect Miyagi's words.

「Well, if you're so worried about getting my home all wet, then you should take your clothes off.」

「Just give me a towel.」

This time, I was firm with my demand.

Miyagi had undone the buttons on my blouse many times before, but I didn't mind since I wasn't the one doing it myself. But today was different. I would have to unbutton my blouse on my own and willingly take off my school uniform, all while doing it right in front of Miyagi.

Taking off my uniform in front of Miyagi without her ordering me to, while she insisted on staying here, felt completely different from changing clothes at school. It felt like there was some strange significance attached to me undressing in front of her, so I

shot her a defiant glare.

「Okay, wait here a bit. I'll go grab one.」

I wasn't sure if Miyagi had given up on her stance or if she was planning something else, but either way, she headed to her room to get a towel.

「… What should I do about my uniform, though?」

It felt disgusting against my skin, and I wished I had something to change into.

Honestly, I knew I should have just accepted Miyagi's offer for a change of clothes. It shouldn't have mattered whether she was there watching or not. What was truly odd was how self-conscious I felt about undressing on my own.

If only it hadn't rained today.

If today had been a clear day, Miyagi wouldn't be telling me to take off my clothes. I wouldn't be shivering in my cold, wet uniform, nor would I be stressing myself out trying to figure out her intentions.

「Ah, geez.」

I took off the elastic band I had used to tie my hair.

Even after we kissed, our relationship didn't change much. She would lick my ears, tie my hands up with a necktie, and call me indecent, but that was the extent of it.

But lately, all of her orders have been centered on her doing things to me, which made me feel a bit self-conscious. I knew I was probably overthinking it and being too self-conscious about things I shouldn't even be worrying about.

As I kept needlessly worrying about things beyond my control, Miyagi returned from her room and handed me a bath towel.

「Here you go.」

「Thanks.」

I said as I graciously accepted the towel and began drying my hair.

「What are you going to do about your uniform?」

Miyagi asked while staring at me.

It seemed like there was no way I was getting out of this without her watching me.

「I'll try to dry it off with the towel.」

「That's not going to work.」

「You're so stubborn, Miyagi.」

「I'll lend you a change of clothes, so just take your uniform off.」

「… Do you really want me to undress that badly?」

「Yeah. If you stay like that any longer, you're going to end up catching a cold.」

I had walked this far in the pouring rain, which had been so heavy that even an umbrella was useless. What's more, I was still wearing my wet school uniform.

I wouldn't even be surprised if I had already come down with a cold.

「Don't move.」

Miyagi said quietly as she grabbed my hand.

Her eyes were fixated on my soaked blouse, and I had a feeling I knew what she was going to do next.

「Is that an order?」

I asked.

「Yes, it is.」

She responded as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

What she planned next would probably go far beyond just me changing out of my clothes.

‘I should shake her hand off,’ I thought to myself.

On the day we played that ridiculous eraser-hunting game, I proposed a rule that forbade stripping. If I applied that rule now, I could end what was happening by claiming it broke the rules. This would also override her order for me to remain still.

But I stayed silent, and Miyagi let go of my hand. My newly freed hand dropped to my side without me making any effort to push Miyagi away. Even though I hadn’t given her permission, she began to unfasten my necktie and then unbuttoned the second button on my blouse.

I had a good reason for obeying her order.

If I didn’t take off my wet school uniform soon, I was bound to catch a cold, so getting changed was necessary.

It was, without a doubt, the right thing to do.

「I didn’t bring a spare change of clothes today.」

I said to Miyagi, who still hadn’t taken her eyes off me, but it felt more like I was saying it to convince myself that I was doing the right thing.

I’m only taking off my wet uniform so I can put on some dry clothes.

「Like I said, I can just lend you some.」

Miyagi’s hands had now moved to the third button, which I typically never unbutton at her place.

She didn’t appear to be amused in the slightest.

I wasn't enjoying the situation or what she was doing either, but that didn't mean I could defy her orders.

Miyagi's hands slowly unfastened the third button before moving on to the fourth.

As I debated whether I should mention the new rule or not, I suddenly recalled that we had left it ambiguous last time. Although I had suggested the rule, it wasn't something we had clearly agreed upon. Therefore, I had no reason to stop her. Taking wet clothes off was a reasonable action, and Miyagi was doing the right thing by helping me, since I couldn't bring myself to undress at someone else's front door.

There was nothing wrong with what we were doing.

While I was still trying to justify our actions, Miyagi had already undone all the buttons and opened my blouse. Her eyes stayed locked on me and my body.

Whatever, it's fine.

Having been in the same class before, Miyagi and I had changed for gym class in the same room. I couldn't recall what kind of underwear she wore or what her body looked like, but since we had changed in front of each other before, it wasn't a big deal if she saw my underwear. In fact, it would have been weirder if I did care.

I knew that, but I couldn't help but frantically search for reasons to convince myself not to care.

I was acting really strange today.

Maybe it was the rain, or Miyagi's intense gaze, or perhaps the cold that was clouding my judgment.

Miyagi brushed the strap of my bra with her fingertips.

The strap moved slightly, causing me to flinch.

'I should probably stop her hands now,' I thought to myself, but I was ordered not to move, so there was nothing I could do. Plus, it wasn't just my uniform that got wet. My undergarments were soaked too, so it was only natural for her to be taking it off.

Right, there was nothing I could do.

I took a small breath in, then exhaled.

But Miyagi pulled her hand away without moving the straps aside or undoing my bra.

「Aren't you going to resist?」

Miyagi asked even after having come all this way.

「You're the one who ordered me not to move, Miyagi.」

「If you want to resist, then just do it.」

「I will if you break a rule.」

「Isn't what I'm doing right now against the rules already?」

「Oh, for sure. If my uniform wasn't all wet, I'd have beaten you up by now.」

It was raining, and my uniform was soaked.

If I left it like that, I would have caught a cold.

Considering the ambiguity of the new rule I wanted to add, there was a valid reason to make an exception for what she was doing now.

「So you're saying you're making a special exception today?」

「Yeah. I mean, you said it yourself, didn't you, Miyagi? That I'll catch a cold if I kept my uniform on.」

「But I haven't even paid you yet.」

Miyagi was acting like a coward. She was the one who had given the order, and now she was looking for a way to back out of it.

「Were you not planning to?」

「I'll give it to you later.」

After offering what sounded like an excuse, Miyagi pressed her palm flat against my chest.

It was warm.

But something was off.

Miyagi's hand was warming me on the outside, but for some reason, the heat seemed to reach deep inside. It was so intense that it almost felt as if she were touching my heart directly, making me want to escape as quickly as possible. Yet my body refused to move, as if it were trapped in her palm. My heart started to race faster than usual.

「You're so cold, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi mumbled.

「Yeah, because I got drenched by the rain.」

I stated the obvious while staring at Miyagi, who was looking right back at me. Seemingly unaware of my gaze, she brushed my cheek with her hand, then my lips, before pulling away.

We were rapidly moving away from the "right" path.

Her removing my wet uniform could be justified as helping me avoid catching a cold, but I couldn't explain the rest of what was happening. It didn't feel right for Miyagi to stare at me so intently or for her hand to be touching my cheek and lips.

The excuse Miyagi had given me was no longer valid.

I knew I needed to stop Miyagi. I shouldn't be letting her do this to me. But seeing her hesitation made me waver as well, and I continued to tolerate her behavior.

If she had given me a harsh order, like tying my hands with a necktie, I would have had grounds to complain. If she had removed my bra without hesitation, I could have easily put an end to it and gone home.

Instead, Miyagi gave me a half-hearted order, and her visible hesitation made me want to go along with her. I should have put a stop to it by now, but my hand, as if acting against my will, reached out to Miyagi and touched her cheek.

「But you're pretty warm, Miyagi.」

This was the wrong kind of warmth. My cold body needed to stay cold so that the warmth inside could also dissipate. Even though I knew this, my hand kept touching Miyagi, and I debated whether I should touch her lips as she had touched mine.

Miyagi placed her hand on mine, grasped it, and pulled me closer.

With our faces just inches apart and our eyes locked, I could sense what she wanted to do next.

If I closed my eyes, it was likely our lips would meet.

Miyagi moved even closer. She was so close that I couldn't see her entire face, but I noticed one thing: she was still wearing her school uniform, even at home.

It was always like this.

I've never seen Miyagi wear anything other than her uniform.

But I wanted to see more sides of her while she was at home.

For instance, I wanted to see Miyagi undo her necktie and unfasten the buttons on her blouse, just as I was being made to do. The fact that I was the only one being undressed felt unfair, which made me want her to experience the same thing.

As if she sensed the indecent thoughts in my mind, Miyagi released my hand and stepped back. She then reopened the front of my blouse.

Miyagi let out a small sigh and pressed her lips to my chest, sucking on my skin as if to exchange our warmth. As if the last of my sense of reason had been washed away by the rain, I craved more of Miyagi's warmth and reached out to grab her shoulders.

□□ No, I can't do this.

Just as I pulled Miyagi closer, her lips parted from my skin.

Miyagi's fingertips traced the spot where her lips had been, gently caressing and pressing on it. She was likely checking for a mark, similar to the ones she had left on my arm before, to see if there was anything visible.

Miyagi should have known this too, but it was nothing like leaving a hickey on my arm. Even if the mark fades, it's like leaving a stain on the heart. And it wouldn't affect just me; it would likely leave a mark on Miyagi as well. It would serve as an unspoken punishment for crossing the boundaries of our ambiguous rules.

Miyagi drew her face closer to my chest again.

When she pressed her lips to my skin, I tightened my grip on her shoulders.

「Weren't you supposed to be helping me take my clothes off?」

Miyagi raised her head as I asked.

「I doubt the mark will stay on you for very long.」

I felt a bit relieved that she hadn't immediately responded with, "I'll take your clothes off now." Really, I did. But part of me was also a little disappointed. I swallowed a sigh that threatened to reveal my true feelings.

「Look, it'll disappear right away, so it'll be fine.」

Miyagi, with a sheepish look on her face, said as she distanced herself from me.

「I'll bring you a spare change of clothes.」

Miyagi mumbled as she turned her back to me.

Seeing her back reminded me of the day I first met Miyagi at the bookstore.

On that cloudy day, her back looked different from how it does today. However, it was that day that led me to find a place where I belonged: Miyagi's room.

So then, what did I gain today?

□□ It was best not to think about it.

My hands clutched my blouse, which was still left open.

Chapter 18

The Things That Miyagi Does Despite Us Not Being Friends (I)

(Sendai PoV)

Part 59

I spent yesterday pretending to be Miyagi's friend, then went over to her house and kissed her.

The five-thousand-yen bill that she gave me was now resting in my piggy bank. Apparently, the value of a kiss was worth five-thousand yen – which, in my opinion, was way too much.

I didn't even want her money.

I tried turning it down after the kiss, but Miyagi wouldn't back down. The five-thousand-yen bill that was forced upon me made my piggy bank feel a little heavier than before. As a result, I found myself unable to sleep well before visiting Miyagi's place again.

I could feel the sleep deprivation affecting me, causing me to struggle to stay focused.

While I wasn't exhausted enough to fall asleep instantly, my eyelids felt heavy as I lay on Miyagi's bed. Closing my eyes, I became aware of Miyagi's scent – something I rarely noticed – which was keeping me awake.

This is the worst.

There were a lot of reasons for my lack of sleep.

I wasn't going to bother listing all of them out, as it wouldn't make me any less sleepy, but in short, it was all Miyagi's fault. Even as I took a break from studying, I couldn't nap because of her.

And because she wasn't in the room at the moment, I didn't

even have anyone to complain to, so all I could do was toss and turn on the bed. Miyagi was probably in the kitchen pouring drinks for both of us right now.

After letting Miyagi know I wasn't into carbonated drinks, she began offering me barley tea as if it were the only alternative in her mind. Not once did she check if there was another beverage I preferred or ask about my favorite drink.

We've known each other for over a year now, so it would've been nice if she showed a bit more interest in me. Then again, I hadn't really asked Miyagi about her preferences either, so maybe I was in the same boat.

Shutting my eyes, I could hear the sound of footsteps approaching down the hallway.

As soon as the door opened, Miyagi's exasperated voice echoed in my ears.

「Don't fall asleep, Sendai-san.」

「I'm not falling asleep.」

I answered, still laying on her bed. Then, I heard a clink, which was probably her placing the cups on the table.

「Your eyes aren't even open.」

「I'm taking a break right now, so I'm just resting them.」

I said as I turned my back to her to the direction of her voice.

「Get up, Sendai-san.」

The voice came from closer than I expected, followed by a poke on my cheek.

When I opened my eyes to look, I saw Miyagi sitting by the bed.

For some reason, Miyagi – who keeps insisting that we can never be friends – always touches me so casually. She was like this yesterday as well.

She was always so grumpy, yet she would always do whatever she pleased.

Miyagi seemed displeased with me yesterday, to the point where she was prepared to leave me behind and go home alone despite my efforts to avoid offending her by behaving as if we were friends. Even now, I still don't understand where I went wrong.

Miyagi had shut down the idea of us being friends before, but this time, she was pretty clear that it was never going to happen, and she even threw in how disgusted she was by me.

To be frank, I wasn't very amused by all this.

Plus, it was infuriating how she didn't seem to be bothered by it at all. Though admittedly, it was true that the word "friend" didn't really apply to us either.

It just felt like no matter where I looked, there was always something to complain about.

Whether it was the atmosphere or the distance between us – everything seemed off.

The term "friend" felt simultaneously like the closest and farthest label we could apply to ourselves – it just didn't seem to suit us. It was like trying to force a puzzle piece into a place where it didn't fit.

「We haven't finished our problem sets yet.」

Miyagi spoke quietly as she slid her hand from my cheek down to my neck.

Before I could even slip a complaint in about how ticklish it felt, her hand stopped right at my collarbone.

「Just keep going without me.」

「But there are some parts that I don't understand.」

Despite being the one to bring up the unfinished problem sets herself, Miyagi made no attempt to get back to work. Instead, she

remained by my side.

Had Miyagi and I not met at the bookstore that day, we probably would've graduated from high school without having spoken to each other once. We weren't the type to become friends in the first place. Still, given our situation now, I felt like it would've been for the best if we at least managed to settle on being friends. However, it seemed incredibly unlikely for us to reach that point now.

I placed my hand on top of Miyagi's, which was still resting on my collarbone.

「What?」

Miyagi asked in a low voice as she tried to pull her hand away. However, I grabbed hold of it before she could do so.

「Is your heart pounding right now?」

「… Right now?」

「Yeah.」

「… No, not right now, but…」

「But what?」

「Well, what about you, Sendai-san? Is yours pounding?」

「I don't think so.」

I was conscious of her presence, but my heart wasn't racing. On that note, while it wasn't like I wanted to hold hands with Miyagi every time we walked down the streets or anything, being by her side made me feel right at home.

I let go of her hand and traced her lips with my fingers.

「Were you thinking of kissing me again today?」

I asked quietly, and in response, she gently replied with,

「… Is it not allowed to cross my mind?」

「Hm, who knows?」

Life would be so much simpler if everything in the world could be neatly sorted into either “right” or “wrong.” Sadly, many aspects, especially those involving Miyagi and me, didn’t fit into such clear categories.

The things that didn’t fit either category resembled a blend of various colors, impossible to separate. The idea of forcing a label on these ambiguous and unstable hues was daunting, as if they might crumble and vanish the moment a label was applied. That’s why certain things were just better off being left uncategorized.

Plus, even if I told her it was wrong, it wasn’t like she would listen to me anyway.

「Miyagi, tell me what you need help with. I’ll teach you whatever you don’t know.」

I said as I sat up and looked over at the table.

Once I help her with the parts she’s struggling with, she’ll be all set for the new semester, and it’ll wrap up today’s session.

I thought to myself as I tried to get out of her bed, but Miyagi got up before me to grab something from her desk.

「Here.」

Miyagi said curtly as she tried to hand me a five-thousand-yen bill.

「I don’t need it.」

「Just take it.」

「I bet you think you can do anything you want as long as you pay up, don’t you?」

「Well, I don’t think I’m wrong.」

Miyagi’s words were one of the things that couldn’t be classified as either “right” or “wrong.”

A five-thousand-yen bill was the link between us, but during summer break, it felt unnecessary. She had already covered the tuition fee, so anything beyond that seemed excessive.

「Look, if there's something you want to order me to do, then just do it. I haven't really been teaching you much lately, so consider it part of the tuition fee.」

I don't mean to brag, but the frequency of Miyagi saying, "I don't get this part," has decreased compared to before summer break. Her grades should see an improvement in the new semester.

「No, those are two completely separate matters. Just take it.」

Miyagi said as if it were the most natural thing in the world as she placed the bill on my lap.

This bill held a different meaning from all the other bills she gave me before summer break.

Judging by where the conversation was heading, I could only assume she was paying me because she wanted something like yesterday to happen again.

She was probably going to order me to kiss her, and if that was all she wanted, then I didn't need her money. I'd feel more comfortable if it was included in the tutoring fee instead. Paying me five-thousand-yen just seemed like an unnecessary effort to turn a trivial matter into something more significant than it should be.

「No, I said I don't need it.」

I said firmly. Miyagi's eyes wavered.

Noticing the anxiety in her eyes, I heaved a sigh.

She was probably feeling this way because she didn't want to be turned down after going out of her way to do this.

I took the five-thousand-yen bill from my lap and folded it before leaving it on the bed.

「Okay fine, I'll take it, so just give me an order.」

I spoke in a flat tone, but Miyagi looked relieved nonetheless.

Either way, it wasn't like Miyagi was going to order me to do something outrageous.

Despite always acting so high and mighty whenever she gave me orders, it seemed she also had a timid side to her.

「Well, in that case…」

Miyagi said as she stared at me. Then, after pausing for a while, she followed up with, "Don't move," – an order I'd become all too familiar with by now.

The Things That Miyagi Does Despite Us Not Being Friends (II)

Part 60

Despite being evening already, the sunlight pouring in through the window retained its brightness. I didn't have to glance back to sense that the sun outside was just as intense as it was at midday.

「Do you think it'll be okay even if we leave the curtains open?」

Whether the curtains were open or closed didn't really matter, and I doubted anyone could see us even if they tried. Still, for some reason, I couldn't help but be overly conscious of these trivial details today.

「Shut up.」

Miyagi said, sounding annoyed, as she knelt on one knee on the bed. After closing the curtains and brightening the room with a light, she stood in front of me while I continued to use her bed as a chair.

I instinctively glanced up at Miyagi as she began to run her fingers through my hair. After combing my hair, which was neither braided nor tied up today, Miyagi, wearing a somewhat uncertain expression, slowly leaned in.

I could never understand why she acted like this sometimes.

Just the other day, she would casually press her lips against mine as if it were the most natural thing in the world. However, today, she seemed hesitant about it. Despite forcing a five-thousand-yen bill on me with the intention of kissing me, for some reason, she was acting like this was her first kiss or something.

「Close your eyes.」

Miyagi, fidgeting like a stray cat in front of me, spoke firmly. When I refused to close my eyes, Miyagi eventually covered them with the palm of her hand. The bright room suddenly fell dark, and I felt a soft touch against my lips.

It was the same as yesterday.

Her slightly dry lips briefly touched mine before she pulled away along with the hand covering my eyes.

Our lips only touched for a moment, and the only thing that lingered in my memory was the soft and fluffy sensation, reminiscent of a cream puff.

Miyagi and I have kissed a few times, but they were always quick pecks. If I tried to go for anything more, she would resist. However, there were moments, like now, when she looked a bit unsatisfied, hinting at a desire for something more.

「Miyagi.」

I reached my hand out to her as I called her name. However, before I could touch her, she gave me another order.

「Stay seated.」

Miyagi said as she sat down next to me. Even if she didn't command me to stay seated, I had no intention of moving.

「Okay, I won't get up, but what are you planning to do?」

Miyagi remained silent. Instead, she responded to my question by placing her hand on my thigh.

It was a mistake wearing shorts today.

Her fingers gently slid against my skin as I regretted my outfit choice.

The hand on my leg didn't seem to carry any deeper meaning. If anything, it felt like a doctor doing a check-up on a patient. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but be conscious of the hand resting on me.

Miyagi's hand left me with a slightly unpleasant yet ticklish sensation.

That was how my mind registered the feeling I got from Miyagi's hand on my leg.

Her hand traveled from my thigh down to my knee.

As she explored my leg without any reservation, I grabbed her hand to stop her.

「I thought I told you not to move.」

She said, her voice restrained, as she swatted my hand away.

「It felt ticklish, so I couldn't help it.」

Miyagi frowned as she listened to my excuse for disobeying her orders.

She frowned as she stroked my knee.

Once again, I couldn't figure out whether her touch was unpleasant or ticklish, so I seized Miyagi's wrist. However, seemingly dissatisfied with that, she immediately pulled her hand away from my grip and closed the gap between us in an instant. As a result, I could feel the touch of her lips against mine without shutting my eyes.

Her hand grasped my hipbone.

Closing my eyes intensified the sensation of her lips on mine. The warmth between our connected bodies was so intense that it felt like I could melt, tempting me to surrender my reason.

Regardless of whether these orders were considered bad or not, I didn't have an issue with kissing. However, if I had to choose, I'd rather be the one initiating the kiss than being on the receiving end.

When I was the one being kissed, the desire to touch Miyagi would surface, making me feel like I was doing something wrong. Whether it could be labeled as "pleasure" or not, it definitely stirred an uncomfortable feeling within me.

I tightly gripped onto Miyagi's arm, and shortly after, our lips separated. When I tried to go for another kiss, she blocked my mouth with her hand.

「Who said you could do whatever you want?」

She said as she peeled her hand away.

「Can I ask you something?」

「No.」

「Why do you want to kiss me?」

I asked, ignoring Miyagi said.

「I thought I said "no."」

She replied in a low voice, as if she had no intention of answering the question. However, after a short pause, she quietly followed up with,

「Well, if you don't like it, then you can always leave.」

「I can't just run away from an order, you know.」

「What, are you saying you'd run away if you could?」

「Is that what you think?」

「Aren't you the one who always tells me not to answer a question with another question, Sendai-san?」

「Alright, fine. How about you try and kiss me without making an order out of it?」

「Are you telling me the only way I'll get an answer is if I do that?」

「That's exactly what I'm saying.」

I knew what Miyagi's next move was going to be.

In situations like this, she was definitely going to run away.

So, she wasn't going to kiss me.

「Make me something for dinner.」

Just as I predicted, Miyagi suddenly changed the topic.

You're so spineless even though you know full well what the answer is.

She should have realized that I didn't mind kissing her, considering I didn't pull away when she kissed me that day I made her French toast.

「You don't want to kiss me anymore?」

「I'm hungry now.」

「It's a little early for dinner, though.」

I responded, aiming to press Miyagi on the topic she was avoiding, but she evaded by standing up and saying,

「It's fine even if it's a bit early, right?」

Right after that, Miyagi exited the room, leaving me with no option but to trail after her. Upon reaching the kitchen, the first place I checked was the fridge.

「All you have are eggs in here.」

I called out to Miyagi, who was already seated by the bar counter.

「Well, at least it's not empty this time.」

「Wait, Miyagi, what do you even eat every day anyway? How do you survive?」

「Don't you remember the kinds of meals I've served you?」

「… Right.」

I had peeked inside Miyagi's fridge many times before, and it was always low on food. I came to realize that this wasn't a coincidence. Whenever I ate at her place, she would always serve meals that were easy to prepare, like ready-made frozen foods. Moreover, Miyagi wasn't great at cooking, and she didn't seem interested in getting better either.

Miyagi's eating habits weren't the healthiest, but I'd never seen her appear unwell before. While her future health wasn't any of my concern, it would be nice if she asked me to cook for her every once in a while. However, unlike today, Miyagi was usually against that idea.

Considering the contents of her fridge and the fact that I had previously prepared tamagoyaki for her, I opted to make omelette rice, drawing from my somewhat limited knowledge of recipes.

I heated up a frying pan and poured oil into it.

'If only there were more ingredients I could use…' I thought to myself briefly, but there was nothing I could do about it, so I continued frying some rice along with a bottle of ketchup I took from the fridge.

For the omelette, I used eggs and a bit of nearly expired butter left over from making French toast last time. However, it seemed I overcooked the omelette a bit, and when I cut it open with a knife, the egg didn't ooze out as it should have.

Well, whatever. It's not going to matter once it's in our stomachs anyway.

「Food's ready.」

I called out to Miyagi, who was staring at me from the counter table, as I pulled out some tableware and spoons for us to use.

Although it felt a bit early for dinner, I decided to sit beside her. Like always, we exchanged the familiar "Let's eat," and the clinking of spoons against plates filled the room. I savored the first bite, then the second, and finally, the third before turning my gaze towards her seated next to me.

「I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone else here before. When do your parents usually come home?」

Without delving too much into the details, I brought up the one thing I’d always been curious about.

「They’re not home yet.」

She answered quietly, though it was a bit different from what I was asking about.

The fact that she hadn’t mentioned anything about it before probably meant she didn’t want to be asked, so I simply replied with, “I see,” and ended the conversation there.

If she didn’t want to tell me, then I wasn’t going to pry.

But I was a bit curious about when, on those nights when she was afraid of being at home alone, her fears could be eased by someone coming home.

I scooped up the remaining bits of my omelette rice with my spoon.

I doubted my curiosity would ever be satisfied.

After watching Miyagi silently take a bite of her omelette rice, I brought my own spoon to my mouth.

The Things That Miyagi Does Despite Us Not Being Friends (III)

Part 61

Summer break felt a lot shorter this year than it did before.

The reason for that was probably because I spent three days a week over at Miyagi's place.

Last year, I never would've imagined spending more time during summer break with Miyagi than with Umina and the others, let alone consider bending our own rule of "not seeing each other outside of school days."

Miyagi shut her textbook. Treating it as a cue, I asked,

「Are you taking a break?」

「Yeah.」

She answered with a nod as she stood up.

Two weeks had passed since I made omelette rice at her place, and during that time, we'd been proceeding with the idea that we were not friends, like bicycles with their brakes forcibly removed.

We can never become friends.

Going to the movies together and discovering that fact was a mistake. It made our relationship more ambiguous than it already was, and it became a convenient excuse for us to touch each other.

Either way, that didn't change anything about us studying together over summer break. The whole point behind the tutoring arrangement was so we could skirt around the rule of not being allowed to see each other on our days off, so our study sessions continued.

「Here you go.」

After closing the curtains, Miyagi handed me a five-thousand-yen bill.

I wasn't keen on taking her money, but somewhere down the line, accepting it became another one of our unspoken rules. So, all I could do was say "thank you" as I took it from her.

It wasn't like we did this during every study session, though.

We only did this on days when we took breaks.

Not that it was something we formally decided on, but we both knew what was going to happen next even without needing to say anything.

I put the five-thousand-yen bill I got from her into my wallet before taking a seat on the bed. Just like always, Miyagi sat next to me, as if she belonged there.

What we were doing wasn't like what normal friends did, but that didn't matter. We were just going to repeat what happened the day after we went to the movies – share a few kisses and she'd touch me a bit, almost treating me like an anatomical model. But since Miyagi opposed me doing the same to her, she would be the only one touching me.

It really wasn't a big deal.

But I did make sure not to wear shorts to her room anymore.

「Turn your head this way, Sendai-san.」

I turned to face Miyagi, who had been gently pulling on my arm. When our gazes met, she added, "Close your eyes." With no reason to defy her, I did exactly as I was told.

The world went dark for a few seconds.

Then, I felt something soft being pressed against my lips.

The kiss lasted only briefly, seemingly shorter than the anticipation preceding it. As I tried to open my eyes, I heard a

discontented voice remark, “I didn’t tell you to open them,” before she leaned in for another kiss.

At some point, it became normal for our lips to meet, but even now, I still didn’t understand what made Miyagi want to kiss me in the first place.

「Keep your eyes closed a little longer.」

Miyagi said as she continued to kiss me again and again, like a playful dog or cat would do.

As I grew more comfortable with the warmth of her lips, a sense of wrongdoing crept in. It wasn’t like I was expecting a pure and proper relationship with her, yet the thought of the five-thousand-yen in my wallet weighed heavily on my heart.

Even so, the sensation of Miyagi’s lips pressed against mine felt so good, I couldn’t help but grab her arm.

I tried to pull her closer to me, but all that did was cause her to turn her face away. Undeterred, I settled on giving her a peck on the check, prompting her to kick me on the leg in return.

「How many times have I said this already? Stop doing things that are unnecessary.」

「Have you said something like that before?」

「I have.」

Miyagi replied firmly as she shot me a glare.

Miyagi was the only one who had the right to issue orders, not me. But despite that, I’d gone out of my way to initiate a handful of kisses against her wishes.

「Well, even if you did say it before, does it really matter? It’s not that big of a deal.」

I responded casually as I let go of Miyagi’s arm.

I wasn’t happy about taking the five-thousand-yen bill from her, so I didn’t feel like obediently following Miyagi’s orders either.

「It does matter.」

Miyagi refuted, though she didn't sound all that displeased.

All of this was what we did during our breaks from studying, and it was probably just being used as a way to kill the time.

I'm sure the only reason why we didn't take breaks every day was because Miyagi would feel guilty about it if we did.

Whatever we did together was only made possible because it was summer break.

But all of this will be over by the time I come back next week.

When the new semester begins, we'll return to how things were when we met during the first semester.

We had way too much time on our hands lately, which was probably why our relationship became so strange. We just weren't used to having to spend so much time studying with someone who wasn't a friend.

「Sendai-san, you never reflect on your actions, do you?」

Miyagi said while staring at me.

「Of course I do.」

「As if I'm going to believe that. Wait here for a bit.」

Miyagi said as she got up and went over to her wardrobe.

After rummaging through her closet, Miyagi pulled something out of it and turned towards me.

「I'll go over to you. Face your back towards me.」

Miyagi instructed while holding a necktie in her hands. I knew exactly what was going to happen next. That tie was definitely not going to be used for its intended purpose.

「Oh, are you planning to head to school or something?」

I asked without turning my back towards her.

「Why would I go to school when I have no business there? Besides, I'm not the one putting this on. I'm going to be using it on you, Sendai-san.」

「Are you sure you're even allowed to issue orders like that?」

Before summer vacation started, the five-thousand-yen Miyagi paid me bought her some of my time and the authority to give orders. However, since the day we went to the movies together, things changed. Her commands now seemed to serve as excuses to kiss or touch me. I had a feeling she was about to do it again.

「Like what?」

「You're going to order me to let myself get tied up with a necktie, right?」

「It doesn't matter what the order is. At the end of the day, an order is still an order. If you already know what's about to happen to you, then hurry up and turn around.」

Miyagi said while tapping me on the shoulder.

「So, you're not going to reconsider how this necktie is going to be used?」

「Fine. If you're not happy about being tied up with a necktie, then how about we use some rope next time?」

「I think I'll pass.」

Despite not wanting to be tied up, I turned my back towards her and put my hands behind me. She had already paid me, so it was a little too late to refuse her now.

Plus, I felt like if I continued to resist her, she would actually prepare some rope for next time. Unfortunately for me, Miyagi was strangely decisive when it came to these things.

It'd be a huge problem if she went out of her way to buy rope

just to tie me up with it. I really didn't like the idea of that, since it'd imply that she had suspicious intentions. And the fact that I could imagine Miyagi doing it without hesitation really irked me.

「You don't need to go this far now, do you?」

I asked while Miyagi began to tie my wrists together with her necktie.

「I do, since you can't be trusted, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi replied as she secured the knot around my wrists. However, she didn't offer any further instructions like "This will do" or "You can turn around now."

So, I turned around without being ordered to do so.

「I don't believe I told you to turn around yet.」

Miyagi said in a monotone voice as she stood up and walked to her dresser. She retrieved a towel from it before returning to my side.

「What, was there something else?」

「You should probably close your eyes for this.」

Miyagi responded with a non-answer before covering my eyes with the towel she was holding. Reflexively, my eyelids closed. Soon, I felt the towel being wrapped around my head, pressing against my eyes.

「Don't you think this is a little too much?」

I knew what she was trying to do. She wanted to take away my freedom of movement to make sure I wouldn't do anything unnecessary anymore.

I didn't like the idea of it, but at the very least, I knew where she was coming from.

Still, I was hesitant to let Miyagi rob me of my vision.

「I had to do this, since you were never going to reflect on

your actions otherwise.」

「Look, I'll reflect on them from now on.」

「It's a little too late for that.」

Miyagi said firmly as she tightly bound the towel over my eyes.

「Hey, that's way too tight.」

I complained, prompting her to loosen the towel around my head. But I was still unable to open my eyes, so I couldn't see anything.

I did expect her to bind my wrists together, but her blindfolding me came out of left field. This had to be against the rules, right? I wasn't sure. Either way, I had no choice but to accept what was happening to me.

「Look, just don't do anything weird.」

I warned her.

「I'm only going to do what I usually do.」

Miyagi declared, her voice sounding nearby.

However, there was nothing to prove her statement.

With my vision taken away, everything around me suddenly felt unreliable, as if I couldn't trust anything anymore — especially not the Miyagi who had been right beside me moments ago.

「Okay, now you can turn towards me.」

Relying on nothing but my sense of hearing, I faced my body towards the sound of her voice.

Naturally, I couldn't see Miyagi at all.

The Things That Miyagi Does Despite Us Not Being Friends (IV)

Part 62

Surrounded by darkness, the only thing I could feel was Miyagi's body temperature against my neck.

Her hand, devoid of any hidden agenda, moved methodically down to my collarbone.

I was expecting Miyagi to do something different from usual, but to my surprise, she kept to her word. Even with my wrists tied up and a blindfold over my eyes, she wasn't doing anything out of the ordinary. She was touching me the way she always did.

But it didn't feel the same to me.

Probably because I was being deprived of my vision.

That must've been the reason.

Miyagi's hand, which should have felt familiar against my skin, squirmed as if it was greedily absorbing my body heat.

Her warmth crept slowly, tickling me, and as much as I wanted to push Miyagi away, my forcibly bound hands left me unable to move.

「You're quite the pervert, aren't you, Miyagi?」

I said, releasing shallow breaths one after another, as if to dispel the warmth in me that was building up from her touch.

Right now, my hands were tied up and my eyes were blindfolded.

Miyagi's insane if she's willing to do this to someone who's just her former classmate.

She had bound my wrists before, but compared to last time, this was on a whole other level.

「Shut up.」

She replied in a disinterested voice while leaving her hand on top of my collarbone.

「If you want me to stay quiet, then you should fill the silence, Miyagi.」

I was well-aware that Miyagi was right beside me, but not hearing her say anything while her hand rested on my collarbone was starting to make me doubt that the hand actually belonged to her.

「I don't want to.」

Miyagi replied bluntly.

She's so stingy.

I thought, since Miyagi had nothing to lose just by talking, she'd be willing to make some sort of conversation with me, but she refused to budge.

Her hand glided across my skin as she stayed silent.

I could feel her heat through the fabric of my clothes.

She placed her hand right below my collarbone – just above where my heart was.

Putting morality aside, whenever Miyagi paid me five-thousand yen to let her kiss or touch me, she was always well-behaved. Her kisses never went beyond pecks, and the way she touched me would always be rather tame. Both of these orders would end in the blink of an eye, making me feel like it wasn't worth the price of five-thousand yen.

I figured today would be no different.

But Miyagi didn't show any signs of stopping yet.

She brushed my cheek with what I assumed were her lips.

Her hand, which had been resting on my heart, began to move towards my shoulder as the warmth against my cheek faded.

Then, I felt a lukewarm breath, followed by a soft sensation on my neck.

I felt it over and over and over again.

I became keenly aware of the faint sounds of her gentle kisses. However, rather than it feeling good, I felt uneasy, as if dandelion fluff was clinging to my skin.

With a towel wrapped around my eyes, depriving me of vision, my other senses heightened. As a result, I felt far less tolerant of things that I'd previously allowed before.

Even though I wanted desperately to push Miyagi away, I found myself unable to. Instead, I let my voice speak in place of my restrained hands.

「Hey, Miyagi!」

As if to show she had no intention of replying, her warmth remained on my neck.

I decided to give her a kick on her leg.

Finally, the lips that had been kissing my neck repeatedly up until now parted.

「Ouch!」

Even though I kicked her gently, Miyagi reacted as if it hurt.

「When exactly were you planning on stopping?」

「I don't need to answer that.」

I felt a warmth return to my neck as she replied curtly.

Given the size and sensation of the heat, I deduced that it was her hand touching me this time.

Her fingertips brushed against the bottom of my chin, fiddling around as if searching for a vein.

'I wonder what kind of face she's making as she's doing this,' I thought to myself.

Sometimes, whenever Miyagi touched me, there'd be this strange expression on her face. It hasn't been happening as much lately, but I wonder if she still makes that face.

But at the same time, it felt like even if I could see it, I shouldn't.

For a brief moment, I felt grateful I couldn't see anything, but I found myself immediately regretting that thought.

Miyagi's lips touched my cheek as she gently slid her hands over my ears.

My curiosity about her facial expression faded away quickly as I switched my focus to the sensation of her lips and hands.

I didn't sense any suspicious ulterior motives from her, but the sensation from her lips and her hands felt extremely ticklish. I tried to push Miyagi away, but the cloth that bound my wrists together refused to come loose. Meanwhile, Miyagi's hand continued to move along my body as if she wanted to test my sanity.

She shifted her touch from my neck down to my shoulder.

She stroked my arm, then continued along to my side.

Her hand, which traveled down my body, eventually made its way to my thigh. I could even feel her through my clothes.

It felt disgusting and ticklish at the same time.

To me, Miyagi's touch had always felt like that. But before I even knew it, somewhere down the line, a different feeling began to emerge – one that shouldn't be allowed to exist.

「Stop it, Miyagi.」

I said firmly, hoping it'd get through to her.

This situation was starting to get way out of hand.

Even if the way Miyagi was touching me was "just like usual", I couldn't let this go on any longer. But it didn't seem like she had any intention of stopping. Instead, she continued to touch me.

「Hey, stop it already! Also, did you forget what I said earlier? I told you not to do anything weird.」

「I'm not doing anything weird to you, though. I'm just touching you the way I always have.」

「What you're doing right now is weird.」

「No, it's not.」

Miyagi refuted strongly.

She wasn't exactly wrong. She really was touching me the way she usually did.

It was just that we had different definitions of "weird".

But I didn't feel like having this discussion with her, and I definitely did not want to go into detail about why I wanted her to stop either.

「Well, if you keep this up, I'm going to consider it a violation of our rules. Do you see where I'm going with this now?」

Miyagi immediately paused in her tracks.

「Why? It's not like I took your clothes off or anything.」

「Yeah, but this is still against the rules. If you keep going, I'm actually going to get angry.」

Plus, keeping our clothes on wasn't the only rule we had.

We also promised not to use violence, and sex was completely out of the question.

I was okay with her buying my obedience, but not my body.

So, anything beyond this would count as going against the rules.

「Aren't you already angry?」

「If you knew that already, then you better stop.」

I knew where we were headed if we kept up with what we were doing and normalized it. Miyagi was probably aware of it too.

Both of us knew what sort of path laid ahead, so we needed to do everything we could to avoid it. Admittedly, ever since summer break started, I'd been breaking more and more rules by doing things like undressing her and kissing her, but that last line of defense still had to be protected.

「Fine. We'll end it here.」

Miyagi said as she grabbed me by my shoulders.

Uh, doesn't this still count as touching me?

But before I could launch a complaint, I felt something soft pressing against my neck. By the time I realized it was her lips, she bit me gently before quickly moving away. However, she hadn't removed the necktie binding my wrists or the towel around my eyes yet. I still had no freedom to move around.

「Well, if we're done, then get this off me.」

「Turn your back towards me.」

I did as I was told. Then, Miyagi untied my hands.

「Take the towel off yourself.」

Miyagi said with a disinterested tone in her voice as I felt her presence leaving my side.

I removed the blindfold myself before grabbing a cup of barley tea from the table. I got back on her bed and watched as

Miyagi put the necktie away in her closet.

「You're so lewd, Miyagi. You really are a pervert.」

「Shut up, Sendai-san.」

「You're the one that's always doing something weird to me.」

「No, I'm not. You're the one that's acting weird, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi said with a dissatisfied tone in her voice as she took a seat at the table.

I threw the towel in my hands at her and declared,

「No more of this, alright?」

「No more of what?」

「Tying me up or blindfolding me.」

「You're adding more rules again?」

「I'm not calling it a rule, but you're banned from doing it again.」

「If you're not making it a rule, then isn't it fine if I do it again?」

I wasn't sure how serious Miyagi was about doing this again, but knowing her, there was a good chance she would.

This was no laughing matter.

If something like today ever happened again, it'd be a big problem for me.

「No, it's not fine.」

I shut her down firmly before taking a sip of my barley tea.

Summer vacation was almost over.

Hopefully, nothing else would happen during the remainder of it.

Well, I guess taking short breaks every now and then might be fine, though.

Chapter 19

It's Fine Doing Things Like This With Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 63

On the last Sunday of our summer break, Maika invited me to hang out with her. I had nowhere I needed or wanted to be, so I had no real reason to turn her down.

We wandered around, checked out a few stores, and made conversation before finally sitting down to rest at a café we had frequently visited throughout our high school years.

It was just an ordinary Sunday.

We chatted as Maika cut into the pancake in front of her. The scene was no different from last year's summer break, but I knew if I were to be left alone at home right now, my mind would be consumed with thoughts of Sendai-san, so Maika's invitation felt like a godsend.

「Ah, darn. Tomorrow's the last day of summer break.」

Maika groaned as she stuffed her face with her pancakes.

「Did you finish your homework already, Shiori?」

「I did.」

「Really? Is it because you're starting to feel the pressure of having to take entrance exams this year? I mean, just last year you would leave it until the last minute.」

「Well, you know, now that we're third year students, I thought maybe it was about time I started taking my studies seriously.」

In reality, it was all because of Sendai-san.

But there was no way I could ever mention that, so I kept quiet as I poured maple syrup over my French toast.

Taking a bite, I found the outside crispy while the inside was fluffy and as soft as pudding. As I swallowed it, the taste of the mildly sweet maple syrup lingered in my mouth.

「Come to think of it, this is the first time I've ever seen you order French toast, Shiori. You've been doing a lot of things that aren't like you lately. Is the world about to come to an end or something?」

「Now you're just exaggerating. It's not like this is the first time I've finished my homework early, and sometimes I just feel like eating French toast. Isn't that normal?」

「I guess so, but didn't you say you disliked French toast?」

「I did say that, but I've come to learn that it actually tastes pretty good.」

Initially, I thought I wouldn't like French toast, but after trying it, I found that it was quite palatable.

I didn't want to attribute it all to Sendai-san, but I had come to like French toast enough to order it at a restaurant like today. Yet, the thought of French toast inevitably brought back memories of that day, prompting me to absentmindedly stab my fork into the French toast before me.

Which was softer, the toast with egg on it or Sendai-san's lips? A completely pointless thought entered my mind. Despite French toast being a sweet dessert, I couldn't help but connect it with the taste of blood, even though it wasn't usually something found in French toast.

The lips I had bitten into were soft, and more blood had come out than I expected. The red fluid had felt slippery to the touch, and when I had pressed down hard on her wound, Sendai-san had shot me a nasty glare.

I could recall the memories I associated with French toast so

vividly, it almost felt like Sendai-san was right beside me.

「Maybe I should've ordered pancakes instead.」

I said while staring at the plate across from me as I brought a bite of French toast to my mouth.

「Do you want to go half-and-half? I kind of wanted to try the French toast too.」

「Sure.」

Agreeing to Maika's suggestion, we handed each other a portion of our food.

「Oh yeah. Do you want to hang out again tomorrow? It's our last day of summer break in high school, so we might as well make the most of it.」

Maika said, as if the idea had just popped into her mind, while taking a bite of the French toast.

「Mm, I have plans already.」

「Ami said she had a date tomorrow as well. You guys sure are hard to get a hold of.」

「I don't want to hear that from you, Maika. You spent the entire break at cram school, so it's been even harder trying to make plans with you this year than last year.」

「Well, that's not something I could help. Wait, what have you even been up to, Shiori? You seemed pretty busy this year.」

「I wouldn't say I was busy. I just had a lot going on at home.」

Of course, by "a lot going on," I was referring to my arrangement with Sendai-san, so I didn't want Maika to press me on it any further. However,

「A lot going on, you say?」

Maika asked, giving me a look that seemed to encourage me

to elaborate.

「Yep, a lot of things.」

「How suspicious. We haven't even talked about what we did over the break yet either.」

「There's nothing suspicious about it.」

I said while trying to swallow my feelings by taking a bite of the pancake. It was fluffy like the French toast but had a slightly different texture and taste.

I'd have to dig deep into my memory to find any instances of having someone by my side during a vacation, whether it was summer or winter. That's how often I was left alone.

But this year, I spent over half of summer break with Sendai-san.

That meant she was the person I spent the most time with during any vacation out of everyone I knew. However, most of that time was spent studying, so there really wasn't anything suspicious about it.

At least, that's how it should've been.

Neither of us had intended on doing the secretive, unspeakable things we usually did — well, that was how it was supposed to be, anyway.

—— Our relationship was rapidly falling apart at the seams.

「Hmm, are you sure you're not hiding anything?」

「I'm not hiding anything.」

As I reasserted myself, I thought back to what happened a few days ago.

That was probably the most unspeakable thing that happened this summer.

I did something that went against our rules.

I hadn't meant to do it, but things just turned out that way.

I touched her because I wanted to touch her, not because I had any ulterior motives. I really didn't. At the same time, I felt incredibly conscious of her gaze, so I did something I wasn't supposed to do. And then I touched her a little more than usual, but maybe I went too far.

When Sendai-san came over two days later, on Friday, we didn't take any breaks. Not that it was the reason why, though.

「Ugh, I wish we had another week off.」

I stared at Maika, sensing the despair in her voice as she spoke.

「Even if your wish came true, you'd be asking for another week off after it's over.」

「Of course. Wouldn't you want to have more days off too, Shiori?」

「No, I've had enough of summer break already.」

「Whoa, that makes you sound like such an honor student.」

Maika said teasingly.

But I really did feel like summer break had gone on for too long.

Tomorrow.

After tomorrow, it'll all be over, and school will start once again.

If summer vacation continued on like this, I felt it was only a matter of time before I would break a rule I absolutely couldn't break. If that ever happened, Sendai-san and I might never be on good terms again.

Just one more day.

As long as we can get through tomorrow without any incidents, everything will be fine.

I knew I wouldn't be able to fix things if I broke a rule, so I had to do whatever I could to avoid breaking them in the first place.

「Well, since summer vacation's not getting any longer, what should we do for the rest of the day?」

Maika asked, poking her fork into her French toast.

「Hmm…」

After pushing Sendai-san out of my head, I made a few suggestions.

We ended up going with some of those ideas, did a few other things on the side, and then went our separate ways.

When I got home, I had dinner, took a bath, and then crawled straight into bed. I fell asleep as soon as I closed my eyes and woke up before my alarm went off. I didn't sleep very well, but it wasn't too bad either, so my mind was in relatively good condition.

I went through my routine, just like always.

I wore the same clothes I usually did and ate lunch at my usual time. While waiting for a message from Sendai-san, I started reading the book I had recently bought. Within an hour, she messaged me and then came over.

As soon as I met Sendai-san at the entrance, I handed her the last five-thousand-yen bill for the summer break. She tried to protest, saying I was paying too much for one session, but I forced her to take it before sending her to my room.

I went to the kitchen, poured a glass of soda and barley tea, and brought them to my room, setting them on the table like always. Textbooks and workbooks were scattered open across the table. As usual, Sendai-san sat down next to me.

I looked over at Sendai-san.

'Her hair is in the way,' I thought to myself.

Sendai-san hadn't braided or tied her hair, obscuring her face and preventing me from seeing what sort of expression she was wearing for the last day of summer break. All I could see was her intense focus on the textbook in front of her.

Wanting to take a good look at her face, I reached my hand out. However, before I could even touch her hair, Sendai-san shot me a suspicious glare.

「Stop staring at me and focus on your work.」

Sendai-san said as she poked me on the forehead with her pencil.

The ticklish feeling on my forehead reflexively caused me to push her hand away.

I had paid her five-thousand-yen earlier.

But it wasn't meant for what I was trying to do just now. It wasn't something I was allowed to do, so stopping here was for the best.

However, even though I knew that I shouldn't, I reached out and touched Sendai-san anyway, moving my face closer to hers. But before our lips could meet, she poked me on the forehead with her pencil once again.

「Miyagi. It's a little early to be taking a break, but are you going to do it anyway?」

The voice that asked the question sounded quiet and subdued.

I couldn't gauge her emotions from looking at her facial expression either.

「……」

I'm not taking a break.

We really shouldn't take one.

But despite thinking that, I couldn’t bring myself to say it out loud.

It's Fine Doing Things Like This With Sendai-san (II)

Part 64

「School starts tomorrow, so you should probably focus on your studies.」

Sendai-san said as she pointed at my textbook with the tip of her pencil.

「… Look, I'll give you another five-thousand-yen later.」

Words I hadn't intended to say slipped out of my mouth.

I knew I shouldn't be trying to give her another five-thousand-yen, and I definitely shouldn't be kissing her again. Going any further was also out of the question. Sendai-san should know this too, so it was likely she'd turn me down anyway. We both understood the consequences of going down this road, so it was crucial for us to get through the rest of the day without any incidents.

I tried to convince myself by listing all the reasons why we shouldn't, but I also knew there was a part of me that wanted to deny them all.

「Do you think you can get away with it just because you're promising to pay me later?」

Sendai-san asked as she put her pencil down on the table.

「I can give it to you right now if that's what you want.」

I said, standing up to do exactly as I mentioned.

But as I did, I felt Sendai-san pulling on my arm.

「We're already way past the point where that matters.」

‘What do you mean?’

The words I was about to say were cut off by the sensation of her soft lips on mine. My heart pounded at the unexpected kiss, the sound echoing in my head.

‘Why?’

I thought to myself, but the question I wanted to ask disappeared as our lips parted.

「I didn’t order you to do that.」

I hadn’t meant to say it, but the words slipped out as I stared at Sendai-san.

「I know.」

「If you knew that already, then stop acting on your own accord.」

「Is that an order?」

「Yeah, it is.」

「I see. But you haven’t paid me five-thousand-yen yet, so you don’t have any right to order me around right now, Miyagi.」

「That’s why I said I’ll give――」

「And didn’t I tell you that we’re way past the point where that matters?」

Sendai-san interrupted me as she grabbed hold of my arm.

Her fingers dug into my skin, causing pain in my upper arm. However, before I could protest, Sendai-san spoke up.

「Miyagi, you should give more thought to your actions.」

She didn’t give me any time to think about the meaning behind her words.

Sendai-san closed the gap between us and kissed me again.

Her lips pressed firmly against mine, causing my body to lean back. She didn't push me down, and I hadn't planned to lie down, yet I found myself on the floor with my back against it.

「Don't bite me.」

Sendai-san said, her expression deadly serious as she stared at me.

I immediately understood her intention when she brought her face closer to mine again.

Her long hair brushed against my neck and cheeks.

I reached out to sweep aside the strand of Sendai-san's hair obscuring her face. Before I could get the chance to close my eyes, our lips met, followed by a sensation softer than her lips touching mine. I could tell immediately that it was the feeling of her tongue parting my lips and entering my mouth.

Her tongue moved around in my mouth without reservation. It had just the right firmness to it, and when it touched mine, the sensation of its slipperiness vividly imprinted itself in my mind. I could distinctly feel a part of Sendai-san's body inside me. It wasn't exactly unpleasant, but it didn't feel good either.

Normally, I would have already sunk my teeth into her tongue as it freely explored my mouth, but Sendai-san's earlier words held me back, and I didn't dare to bite down.

Feeling out of breath, I grabbed onto Sendai-san's clothes, and our lips separated.

「I don't think we should be doing things like this.」

I murmured as I pushed her away by the shoulders.

「Yeah, you're right.」

Sendai-san agreed without protest. Despite this, she moved closer to me once more, contradicting what she had just said. In response, I raised my voice louder than before.

「Sendai-san!」

「You know, Shiori. You should call me “Hazuki” at times like this.」

「I’m not going to do that, and don’t call me that either.」

「You really are stingy, huh, Miyagi?」

Sendai-san sighed. Then, she inched closer to me as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

「… Are you planning to keep going?」

Instead of shutting her down, I posed a vague question to her.

「This is all because of what you tried to do earlier, Miyagi.」

「What do you mean?」

I asked, despite knowing exactly what she was referring to.

「You wanted to kiss me, didn’t you?」

Sendai-san’s brushed her fingertip against my lips.

There had always been a boundary between us, something we both knew not to cross. But ever since the beginning of summer break, that boundary had started to blur, and now it felt like we were about to cross into forbidden territory.

If I had to pinpoint when this all started, it was probably on that day I touched Sendai-san more than I should have.

「Miyagi.」

She called out to me in a tone that was unusually serious, which I’d normally find laughable.

She didn’t tell me what she was going to do, but I knew what was going to happen next.

Sendai-san leaned in closer to me and kissed me deeply once more.

Our gazes locked as our tongues intertwined. I could feel Sendai-san more intensely, making this kiss feel even better than the last.

Ten seconds might have passed, or perhaps it was twenty. It could have even been a whole minute.

Our lips parted before I could figure it out, but I quickly followed up with another kiss.

Kissing her without paying her five-thousand-yen felt completely natural. I expected it to be strange, but it was surprisingly comfortable, as if our lips were meant to meet.

When I pulled away, Sendai-san's breathing was ragged.

But so was mine.

No matter how hard I tried to steady my breathing, nothing seemed to work. It was probably the same for Sendai-san as well.

「My back hurts.」

I said, attempting to conceal my shallow breaths.

「Just deal with it.」

Sendai-san's words sounded a bit cruel, but she had a point.

If we were to move to the bed instead, there was no telling what would happen next. That was how far gone our relationship had become.

'If I were to turn back, now would be the time,' I thought to myself.

I could push Sendai-san away by her shoulders, sit back up, return to my textbook and pretend as though nothing had happened.

August 31st, the last day of summer break. It bothered me that such a memorable date would forever be associated with what we did together.

It'll linger in my mind, like an anniversary. I just know it.

But since our relationship started because of a series of coincidences and whims, it felt justified for us to do what we just did, given it also happened spontaneously… Surely. Probably.

Sendai-san pressed her lips against my neck, her teeth gently sinking into my skin.

She had kissed me in the exact same spot before, but this time, it felt strangely different.

I straightened my back as I felt a chill run down my spine.

The sensation of her tongue on my skin was all I could focus on, and the dampness on my neck made me uneasy. Her lips traveled down my neck toward my collarbone. Occasionally, she would gently sink her teeth in, as if checking for something, and then suck on my skin.

Hearing Sendai-san's ragged breathing and feeling her continuous kisses made me release a sound I'd never made before, prompting me to bite down on my own lip.

Then, Sendai-san suddenly stopped for a moment.

She lifted her head and locked eyes with me.

I expected her to say something, but she didn't. Instead, she remained silent and slowly began rolling up my T-shirt.

I could feel Sendai-san's body heat directly against my waist.

I had no intention of calling her "Hazuki," yet I didn't want to stop her from going further either.

'So this is what having the right atmosphere feels like.'

My thoughts had wandered when I was kissing Sendai-san earlier.

I noticed her voice was unusually firm.

I couldn't help but be aware of her breathing pattern.

Above all, I couldn't help but notice how different it felt to kiss without me needing to give orders.

All those little things added up, leading me to believe that what we were doing right now was special.

Her hand sliding under my T-shirt felt increasingly natural against my skin, as though it belonged there. I no longer resisted surrendering my rationality, reciprocating by slipping my hand under her blouse and touching her back directly.

「Miyagi, that tickles.」

Sendai-san said as she looked at me with a rare, uncomposed expression on her face.

「You're tickling me too.」

However, we both knew that beyond this unsettling ticklish feeling, there was something undeniably pleasurable about it.

I traced her spine with my fingertips. When I reached about halfway up her back, she spoke in a hoarse voice, making my heart skip a beat.

「Hey, I just said that tickles.」

Sendai-san said, as if trying to maintain her composure, as she placed her hand on top of my chest.

Even with my undergarments still on, it felt as if she were touching my bare skin, making my face flush.

I had never been concerned about it before, but a part of me was curious about Sendai-san's thoughts on the size of my chest. However, when I glanced at her face, all I could discern was a faint blush.

I felt her hand slowly inching towards my back.

My shoulders tensed as Sendai-san's fingers neared the center of my back. But before she could undo the hook, the intercom rang.

My breathing and movements came to a sudden halt.

Then, after a short pause, the intercom rang once again.

「Aren't you going to go take a look?」

Sendai-san asked.

「No. It's probably just a solicitor anyway.」

「I'm okay with whatever you decide.」

I immediately understood what she was trying to say.

She was making me choose between continuing or answering the intercom.

The intercom, which rarely ever rang in this household, continued to persistently sound.

Sendai-san would often accuse me of being quick to run away, yet she was the same way. She was always forcing me to make the final decisions.

It went without saying that if I got up now to answer the intercom, it would bring an end to what we were doing. There would be no way to continue afterward.

「Miyagi.」

Sendai-san said softly.

「You're such a coward, Sendai-san.」

I pushed her away by the shoulders.

Truthfully, I was no different from Sendai-san. I was just as much of a coward as she was.

Returning to my senses, I stood up to answer the intercom.

I picked up the receiver from the wall to silence the incessantly ringing doorbell. I listened to what the person on the other side of the apartment entrance had to say, but just as I had

suspected, it was someone there to deliver a pointless sales pitch, so I hung up on them.

I took a few deep breaths.

When I turned around, I found Sendai-san leaning against my bed with a manga volume in her hands.

「It was just a solicitor.」

「I see.」

She replied curtly.

I wanted to see her face, even though she didn't seem interested in looking my way.

「Sendai-san.」

「What is it?」

She replied, but her gaze remained downward.

「Never mind.」

I wished I could have touched Sendai-san a bit more, and that she would have touched me a little more. Thinking about how I missed my chance and how an afternoon like this would never happen again, I couldn't help but feel a little regretful.

Chapter 20

Miyagi's All I Can Think About Today (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 65

This is so awkward…

There was no better word to describe the atmosphere between me and Miyagi.

On the last day of summer break, I touched her in ways I never had before and heard unfamiliar sounds from her. Still, all I did was touch her chest a bit, and I barely heard her voice.

But either way, things felt incredibly awkward between us now.

We sat by her table with our textbooks open and homework spread out, but instead of getting anything done, it was clear we were just trying to gauge each other's feelings.

「Hey, say something already.」

I said as I tossed my eraser at Miyagi, who had been silent this whole time.

Today was my first visit since whatever happened last time. The atmosphere in the room felt strange, making it impossible for me to calm my nerves.

「How about you say something instead, Sendai-san?」

Miyagi, sitting across from me, responded coldly and threw the eraser back at me. I picked it up as it rolled across the table and used it to erase some words that didn't need erasing.

Summer didn't end just because our vacation was over. Despite it being September, the heat persisted. It was still hot

enough to enjoy ice cream, and air conditioning remained a necessity.

The temperature in Miyagi's room felt just right.

It wasn't hot enough to justify removing either Miyagi's clothes or my own. Naturally, there was no reason for me to touch Miyagi, and no opportunity for it either.

It had only been a few days since the start of the new school semester, and yet here I was, with my mind in the gutter.

I wasn't planning to do anything to Miyagi today.

There was no reason for an atmosphere like that to develop between us anyway.

Well, that goes without saying.

We didn't have the kind of relationship where we'd have sex with each other, so there was no reason for that sort of atmosphere to arise between us.

—— So, why?

I couldn't deny that I was thinking about being intimate with Miyagi when we did what we did the other day. I wasn't particularly surprised by my desires either. Everyone had sexual desires of some sort, and Miyagi was likely no exception, so I didn't find it strange to have those thoughts.

But why did I have to have those kinds of desires toward Miyagi of all people?

「What are you looking at me for?」

Miyagi asked, her tone colder than usual. Her icy gaze only added to the discomfort. I knew it was just a front and wasn't overly worried, but her attitude still left me feeling weighed down and a bit disheartened.

「Can I not look at you?」

I replied, trying to keep my tone as neutral as possible.

「No.」

「Okay, fine.」

I dropped my gaze towards my textbook.

“Do my homework for me.”

If only Miyagi had given me an order like that; it would have helped distract me. Instead, she was focused on her own homework. I had my own assignments to tackle, but I couldn’t concentrate on the problems in front of me. Before I knew it, my mind was wandering, replaying memories of Miyagi.

Even if I could forgive myself for having these thoughts, accepting them was still difficult.

Forcing myself to confront the fact that I had these desires for Miyagi was something I never expected.

I could still recall the feeling of Miyagi’s chest in my hand.

I clenched my right hand tightly, leaving fingernail marks on my palm. After a moment, I relaxed my grip, lifted my head, and rolled my eraser towards Miyagi.

「Are you sure I can’t look at you, Miyagi?」

「Aren’t you already doing it? Also, why are you even going out of your way to ask me this?」

「Because earlier, you told me not to look at you.」

「Whatever. More importantly, get back to your homework, Sendai-san.」

「I will, as long as you tell me I’m allowed to look at you.」

My eraser was not returned to me.

Miyagi wore a displeased expression on her face.

「Didn’t I say you weren’t allowed to look at me earlier?」

「Well, you didn't explicitly say I wasn't allowed to.」

When I nitpicked her, Miyagi frowned and, clearly annoyed, stood up to grab a manga volume from her bookshelf.

「If you're not going to do your homework anyway, why don't you read this instead?」

She said as she placed the book on the table.

「I just bought this yesterday, so it's something you haven't read before.」

I couldn't understand why she was so opposed to me looking at her. It seemed like she was suggesting that if my eyes had to wander, I might as well read the manga instead of staring at her face.

Seeing Miyagi react like this was pretty cute.

But it wasn't anything that stirred up any lustful feelings.

Miyagi was just an ordinary girl – there was nothing particularly remarkable about her. When we were classmates, she was merely an inconspicuous, plain girl in my class, and now she was still just as unremarkable – only this year, she was in the classroom next door.

To be more precise, while she didn't stand out much, she wasn't exactly normal either. Normal people wouldn't order someone to lick their feet or bite them hard enough to draw blood.

When I put it that way, it actually sounds pretty awful, huh.

For me to feel attracted to someone like that, I must have a few—no, several—screws loose myself.

I shouldn't let myself indulge in those feelings again.

While I did want to touch Miyagi again, even if I had the chance, nothing more would come of it. I had faith in myself. I didn't want to delve into why those screws in my head had come loose, nor did I need to. Besides, even if I did want to touch her, she

was sitting too far away.

「Are you not going to read it?」

Miyagi tossed my eraser back at me.

「I'll read it next time.」

「When is "next time" supposed to be?」

「That's up to you, isn't it, Miyagi?」

"I guess that's true," Miyagi said, closing her textbook. However, she quickly reopened it and mumbled,

「… Actually, I didn't think you'd come today, Sendai-san.」

Her offhand comment lingered awkwardly in the air.

As if to break the sudden silence, the only sound that filled the room was the rustling of textbook pages, which gradually faded away.

「Why did you think that?」

「Because of what happened last time.」

「Honestly, I didn't expect you to ask me to come over again after that either, Miyagi.」

I was genuinely surprised that Miyagi invited me over today.

I really thought she wouldn't contact me anymore after the new school semester started.

「It's not like you broke any rules or anything.」

She closed the textbook she'd been fidgeting with.

Technically, what happened last time ended as just an attempt.

Since we didn't actually go all the way, I suppose we never really broke the rule against having sex with each other. That being

said, I wasn't entirely sure what counted as sex between women.

「Then why are you sitting all the way over there instead of next to me?」

Not wanting our first conversation of the day to end, I decided to ask what had been on my mind for a while.

Recently, Miyagi had gotten into the habit of sitting next to me rather than across from me.

「Because I can't trust you anymore, Sendai-san.」

She answered bluntly, and in my mind, I couldn't help but agree with her.

I couldn't refute her claim. However, Miyagi didn't seem to reject me either. I wanted to mention that, but fearing that Miyagi would become silent again if I did, I kept the words to myself.

「Let's just finish our homework already.」

Miyagi said something unusually serious for her.

However, instead of filling in the pages of my notebook, my thoughts were entirely occupied by the Miyagi sitting in front of me.

Miyagi's All I Can Think About Today (II)

Part 66

I spun my pencil between my fingers.

Miyagi kept her gaze fixed on her textbook, as if to avoid having to look at me, while she filled in her notebook.

I continued to twirl my pencil, but this time it slipped from my fingers and clattered onto the table. Miyagi, however, didn't even flinch.

「Since we're both just doing our homework anyway, why don't you come sit next to me?」

I called out to Miyagi as I patted the empty space beside me.

「I'm not moving next to you.」

Miyagi answered without sparing a glance.

「Okay, how about I go over there instead?」

「No.」

「Are you ordering me not to?」

This time, when I asked, Miyagi looked up.

「I am.」

Her firm response left me unable to move a muscle.

Since it was an order, I had no choice but to accept it, and I turned my gaze towards my textbook.

I often found myself relying on these "orders" to save me. There were many times when I pressured Miyagi into making tough decisions, and on other occasions, I used it as an escape route. I was every bit as much of a coward as Miyagi said I was.

I didn't have the courage to permanently alter our relationship that day, nor could I bring myself to go against her now. Most likely, Miyagi was refusing to sit next to me for the same reason, which explained the distance between us today.

「Sendai-san, I don't get this part.」

「Where?」

I looked up at Miyagi, who spoke in an unfriendly tone while pointing at a section in her textbook with her pencil.

「Here.」

「It's kind of hard to see from this side, you know.」

To be honest, I could read what Miyagi was pointing at just fine.

Reading numbers upside down wasn't particularly challenging, so I took it as an opportunity to close the distance between us. But instead, Miyagi simply turned her textbook toward me without saying a word.

「You're so stingy, Miyagi.」

I grumbled as I scribbled on her textbook – even though it hadn't done anything wrong – but I quickly erased it.

「What part of this makes me "stingy"?」

「All of it.」

「Stop talking nonsense and just teach me how to solve this already.」

「Sure, sure.」

I gave a half-hearted response as I looked over at her textbook. I then began explaining the problem, writing the necessary formula in the margin of her notebook. Miyagi's expression was hard to read; I couldn't tell if she understood or was still confused as she wrote down the numbers and attempted the

solution.

‘What if we had kept going that day?’

I had imagined countless scenarios over the past few days, but in the end, fantasies should stay as just fantasies.

I wasn’t naive enough to think we shouldn’t do those things unless we were dating, but if we had gone all the way that day, we wouldn’t be sitting here doing homework together like this. Thinking about it that way, I was glad we didn’t go any further. Being able to hang out and read books in her room was far better than risking it all for a one-time fling.

「Is this right?」

Miyagi looked up and asked after finishing the problem.

「Yep, you got it right.」

I said, glancing at what she had written in her notebook.

Miyagi’s gaze immediately dropped back to her textbook.

「Anyway, do you have any other orders for me, Miyagi?」

I had hoped that question would make her tear her gaze away from her textbook, but it was to no avail. She remained silent while wearing a frown on her face.

I could imagine why Miyagi wanted to keep her mouth shut, though.

If she issued any orders carelessly, it could bring up memories of what we did over summer break. Orders that were once inconsequential, like reading her a book or doing her homework, had evolved into something more dangerous. If she gave me an order like that now, it would seem like she was asking for a repeat of summer vacation. On the other hand, if she continued to invite me to her room without giving me any orders, there’d be no point in her paying me five-thousand-yen anymore.

Not that I needed the money or anything.

I could tell her that, but if I did, there'd be no reason for me to come over anymore, so I kept it to myself.

Miyagi, who was sitting in front of me, flipped through the pages of her textbook, as if searching for the right words to say. Naturally, she found nothing, so she lowered her gaze once again and muttered,

「Go home once you're finished with your homework.」

「Is that really what you want to order me to do?」

「Yes.」

Miyagi replied, but it was obvious that it wasn't what she wanted at all.

I could tell, since we'd known each other for a long time now. Miyagi was probably only saying that because she felt she had to.

「Give me a different order.」

「Why are you the one telling me what to do now, Sendai-san?」

「Because I can finish my homework in no time.」

I didn't have much homework to begin with. I could finish it in an hour and still get home earlier than usual.

「So, are you sure about that last order?」

I asked, already anticipating that Miyagi would change her mind.

「… Do my hair for me.」

Miyagi mumbled under her breath.

「Huh?」

「You mentioned once that you'd do my hair for me.」

That must've been something I said a long time ago.

When Miyagi mentioned it, I quickly searched my memory. It was something I'd offered back when I was reading magazines for Umina around the time of our midterm exams.

「Sure. How do you want me to do it?」

Although I managed to recall what I said to Miyagi, I couldn't remember what the girl in the magazine looked like at all.

「Anything's fine as long as it doesn't look weird.」

「What does that mean?」

「Just make sure it looks good.」

For someone who gave such a vague request, she sure wasn't willing to come over to me.

She continued to stare at me while still seated across the table.

「Come here, Miyagi.」

Unfortunately, I wasn't blessed with telekinesis, and my arms definitely weren't long enough to reach her from where I sat. If I was going to touch Miyagi's hair, she'd have to come to me. That should've been obvious, but she still showed no signs of getting up.

「Do you seriously expect me to do your hair from all the way over here?」

I could go over to her instead, but I know she wouldn't be happy about it.

「Miyagi.」

When I pressed her on it again, Miyagi reluctantly got up and sat next to me, though she kept a little distance between us.

'Come on, there's no need to be so cautious. It's not like I'm going to do anything to you,' I thought to myself as I took out my hairbrush from my bag.

「Face your back towards me.」

I moved closer to Miyagi and tapped her shoulder, causing her to flinch. Even so, she complied and turned her back to me. I gently ran my fingers through her hair, which fell just past her shoulders. This time, she didn't flinch, but I could sense her tension from the way she held herself.

This is so awkward…

Just as she had said, she didn't trust me. The tension around Miyagi was so thick, it started to make me feel nervous too.

「Your hair is so pretty.」

I offered a compliment, hoping to ease the awkwardness, even if just a little. That said, her black hair really was smooth and felt nice to the touch.

But Miyagi did not react.

All I could do was comb her hair in silence.

I still couldn't recall what kind of hairstyle the girl in the magazine had, and Miyagi's vague request didn't help much either. So, instead of stressing over the details or trying too hard to figure out what she wanted, I decided to simply braid some of her hair.

「You're going with braids?」

Miyagi asked, her back straight as she glanced over her shoulder.

「Yeah. Did you want something else?」

There were a lot of cute hairstyles nowadays.

I probably could've looked up some hairstyles that might suit Miyagi on my phone, but instead, I just kept braiding her hair.

「No, I'm okay with anything, but… this is different from what was in the magazine.」

Although Miyagi said she was fine with anything, her tone

suggested otherwise.

「Don't worry, I'll make you look cute.」

I didn't want to tell her that I couldn't remember what the girl in the magazine looked like.

Besides, braiding Miyagi's hair meant I could touch it for longer, which was something I was even less eager to admit.

「It's okay even if you don't.」

Miyagi said, turning to face forward. Then, she added,

「Look…」

「What is it?」

「I'm going to keep asking you to come over and continue giving you orders.」

「Yeah, I know.」

「And this is going to go all the way until we graduate, so make sure to keep coming over whenever I ask for you like you always have.」

For the first time ever, we were acknowledging when this would all come to an end.

I had always expected that my visits to this room would end once we graduated. Although it seemed like the right time to bring things to a close, for some reason, I felt a need to say out loud just how much time we had left.

「So that leaves us with another six months left?」

「Yeah. Until then, I own a part of your time after school.」

Miyagi said it as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. The awkwardness in the air eased slightly, and about a third of the tension I had been holding in my back also faded away.

I undid her braids and then started re-braiding them.

Miyagi sat still without a single complaint.

Her smooth hair felt really nice to the touch.

The scent that tickled my nose was the same one I usually smelled on Miyagi's bed. As if I was being drawn in by the fragrance of a shampoo that was different from the ones Umina, Mariko and the others used, I inched a little closer to Miyagi.

「Half a year left, huh… That's pretty short.」

I mumbled as my fingers continued to braid her hair.

「It really is.」

Miyagi responded without any emotion in her voice.

Volume 2 Extra

Turning Sendai-san's After-School Time Into a Five-Thousand-Yen Bill

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 66-extra

I was glad we didn't have any classes this afternoon.

But some students were unhappy about having to attend a commemorative school event earlier this morning, and Ami was one of them. We had already finished everything we needed to do, and while all that was left was to just go home, she stood at my desk, venting her frustration.

「Don't you think it's unfair we had to come to school today, even on the school's anniversary? They should just make it a holiday next year.」

"Wouldn't you agree?" Ami added while rattling my desk. But I needed to be the bearer of bad news and remind her of one important detail she had forgotten.

「Even if they do make it a holiday, we're about to graduate soon, so it's not going to have anything to do with us anymore.」

「Oh, you're right.」

Ami said, sounding dejected, and Maika earnestly followed up with,

「It'd be nice to have a day off in June, considering there aren't any other holidays in the month, but it won't really matter if they add one after we've already graduated.」

My two friends came over while I was seated at my desk, and it was obvious they felt differently about having to come to school today. Maika, not as troubled by the lack of a day off as Ami, clapped her hands together, as if to redirect the conversation.

「There's somewhere I wanted to go after this. Are you guys free?」

「Yeah, I should be.」

I replied as I looked over towards Maika. Ami grinned and chimed in with, "Me too."

「In that case, do you want to come with me while I shop for some sunscreen?」

「Yeah, I'll go. Can we stop by the bookstore too? I want to pick up a reference book.」

Hearing Ami's unusually cheerful voice reminded me of a manga I was interested in buying. While Maika needed to pick up sunscreen—a summer essential—the manga I had in mind seemed quite interesting, so I wanted to get it if we had the chance.

'I do have the money for it…'

That reminded me—I was running low on a certain something.

「Wait, sorry. I just remembered I had something to do. You two go on without me.」

「Aw, come on, Shiori. You should just leave your errand for some other time. It probably wasn't that important if you forgot about it until now anyway.」

Ami grumbled, and Maika followed up with,

「Where are you running your errand?」

「Well, it's not a matter of "where." I'm supposed to be doing something with my father.」

「Oh, did your dad get a day off today?」

Maika said, sounding surprised.

「Oh, no, he didn't take a day off. He said he's working

somewhere close by today and has something to give me on his way there.」

Truthfully, I didn't have any plans to meet my father today, and it wasn't like he had any time for that either. I was just making up an excuse to avoid having to tell them that I actually needed to go to the bank.

I was running low on five-thousand-yen bills for Sendai-san. I had made up my mind to only pay her in five-thousand-yen notes—not with five one-thousand-yen bills or a ten-thousand-yen bill and have her give me change. So, I needed to exchange some bills.

To be honest, I found exchanging money to be a huge hassle.

If I could avoid it, I would.

But I didn't have any more five-thousand-yen bills left in my wallet, so it was an errand I needed to run pretty frequently.

「I see. I guess there's no arguing with that.」

Maika spoke with disappointment, and Ami quickly chimed in, "I want to meet Shiori's dad!" It wasn't exactly something I wanted to hear, so I could only try to gently let her down.

「It's not really something worth going out of your way for.」

Meeting up with my father was just an excuse I made up, but even if it wasn't, I didn't want other people to meet him.

「Really? I'd even use the money I got from New Year's to pay just to see him.」

「What are you saying? Okay, how much would you be willing to pay to see Shiori's dad?」

「Maybe about a thousand yen?」

「That doesn't sound like a lot.」

Hearing Maika's response, Ami began to speak as if she took it personally.

「I mean, a thousand yen can buy a whole book, right? If someone paid me a thousand yen, I'd be more than happy to show off my dad to them—or even offer a buy-one-get-one-free deal! Honestly, I'd do anything for that kind of money.」

Ami said with a firm tone. Hearing her made me want to ask,

「Would you really be willing to do anything for a thousand yen?」

「… Well, I guess it depends on what they want me to do.」

Maika burst into laughter after seeing how quickly Ami changed her stance and retorted with,

「That's not what "being willing to do anything" means.」

Well, that was to be expected.

At least Ami was being honest. For most high school students, a thousand yen was a decent amount of money, but it was obvious that no one in their right mind would do anything for just that. It made sense that people had their limits on what they were willing to do.

But what if it wasn't for just one-thousand-yen? For example, let's say it was some other amount instead…

「Hey, Ami. What if I told you I could give you five-thousand-yen instead? Would you be willing to do anything for it?」

I asked while looking straight at Ami.

It was a lot more than a thousand yen, but not nearly as convincing as a ten-thousand-yen bill.

Would she be willing to do it for that amount of money?

「Hmm, let me think…」

Ami contemplated with a serious look on her face. After a brief moment, she cleared her throat, spread both her arms apart and said,

「I would worship you like a god, Shiori.」

I was taken aback by how unexpected her answer was. Maika seemed equally as surprised as she said,

「Ami, why is it so cheap to buy your faith? Also, you didn't answer the question.」

「It's fine even if I didn't, right? I mean, five-thousand-yen is kind of a lowball anyway. If someone really wanted me to do something for them, they should at least offer me ten-thousand-yen. Oh, but I'm just talking hypothetically.」

「Okay, then let's say I was willing to pay you ten-thousand-yen. What would you do?」

Somehow, Ami and Maika began increasing the price, and the answer to my original question drifted further away. Eventually, they started discussing what they would buy with the money instead. Meanwhile, I couldn't shake the thought of the five-thousand-yen bill from my mind.

The five-thousand-yen bill – which Ami apparently considered a "lowball" even in a hypothetical situation – wasn't something people commonly used. Even my father, who gave me a much larger allowance than necessary, rarely left me a single five-thousand-yen bill. As a result, I rarely carried one in my wallet unless by chance.

So, on the day I first met Sendai-san, it was pure coincidence that I had a five-thousand-yen bill with me, and it was what I used to pay for Sendai-san's books.

Obviously, coincidences weren't always going to happen.

Since I began giving Sendai-san my five-thousand-yen bills, I found myself running out of them quickly. Sometimes, I would also have to spend them when making purchases, which led me to look for ways to convert my one-thousand-yen and ten-thousand-yen bills into five-thousand-yen ones. That's when I discovered currency exchange machines. However, I soon realized they were surprisingly inconvenient because banks often closed early, meaning I could only use them during lunch hours or when school ended early, like today.

I had to go out of my way to learn about something new for Sendai-san, and all it did was create more trouble for me.

I should have saved any five-thousand-yen bills I got, kept them in an envelope, and called her only when I had enough, but it didn't quite work out that way.

「I'd better get going.」

I said as I grabbed my bag and stood up.

「Let's walk together until we need to part ways.」

Maika said, and the three of us left school together. After about five minutes of walking, I said goodbye to them and went straight to the bank.

I withdrew some cash from the ATM and then waited in line at the currency exchange machine. When it was my turn, I inserted the money, and the machine converted it into five-thousand-yen bills, which I then put into my wallet.

I was really confused the first time I used the machine, but I've since gotten the hang of it.

I could easily go to the bank and then head home as if it were a routine task.

But sometimes, I'd wonder…

What if, instead of using a five-thousand-yen bill to pay for Sendai-san's books that day, I had used a one-thousand-yen bill and some coins?

Thinking back on what Ami said earlier, there was a good chance Sendai-san wouldn't have followed my orders for that amount of money. She might not have even agreed to come to my apartment. However, if I had used a ten-thousand-yen bill instead, Sendai-san likely would have insisted on paying me back at school, without stepping into my home.

If that had happened, I wouldn't need to save five-thousand-yen bills in an envelope or visit the bank to exchange for them.

As I left the bank, I texted Sendai-san with the usual message.

Then, I headed straight home without even waiting for a reply, and I didn't go to the bookstore either.

As I walked, I made sure to step only on the darker tiles of the sidewalk.

I heard my phone chime from my bag. Pulling it out, I saw a message from Sendai-san on the screen. It looked like the bills I had just exchanged were about to be put to use.

What kind of order should I give to her today?

Back in May, I kissed Sendai-san, and at the beginning of June, I bit her ear.

I kept summoning her, even though I had no clue what other orders to give, and June wasn't even over yet. The only thing I knew for sure was that if I wanted Sendai-san to keep coming over, I had to keep paying her five-thousand-yen bills.

Sendai-san wasn't going to worship me like a god or anything, but for five-thousand-yen, she would do whatever I asked.

A five-thousand-yen bill was equal to five one-thousand-yen bills and half of a ten-thousand-yen bill—nothing more, nothing less. Yet, it was the perfect price to buy Sendai-san's time after school.

But the five-thousand-yen had to be paid with a single five-thousand-yen bill.

I started to walk faster.

No matter what order I planned to give her, I at least needed to make it home before Sendai-san arrived.

About fifteen minutes after I got back home, the intercom rang.

After seeing Sendai-san through the monitor, I unlocked the door to the apartment building. Soon after, I met Sendai-san at the

front door and let her in.

「You're pretty early today.」

For some reason, I ended up saying that without much thought.

「Really? I don't think I got here that quickly.」

Sendai-san said nonchalantly as she removed her shoes, and I headed back to my room without waiting for her. She followed shortly, set her bag down by the bed, and unbuttoned her blouse up to the second button.

「Here.」

I said, passing her the five-thousand-yen bill I had exchanged earlier.

「Thanks.」

Sendai-san replied as she tucked the money into her wallet, as if it were nothing, like she'd done it a million times before.

The five-thousand-yen bill exchange marked the beginning of today's agreement, much like how a single five-thousand-yen bill had started everything between us, but it didn't mean anything more than that. Still, I couldn't help but wonder where the five-thousand-yen that had vanished into her wallet would take us.

Chapter 21

It's Sendai-san's Fault That I'm Losing Sleep (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 67

We were in my room after school, just like always.

But for some reason, Sendai-san hadn't undone the second button on her blouse today. I wanted our after-school time to feel just like usual, but seeing her acting differently made me uneasy.

I knew it was obviously because of what happened over summer break, but this was already the second time she'd come over since the new semester began. By now, I felt like she should've started acting like her usual self again.

Seeing her so self-conscious affected me too, and even after all this time, I still couldn't bring myself to sit next to Sendai-san.

That single button might've seemed trivial, but it was enough to keep me from focusing on my homework—not that I really wanted to do it anyway. I was only using it as a distraction from the little things that were bothering me. But if I couldn't even concentrate on the textbook in front of me, there was no point in trying at all.

「What are you going to order me to do today?」

Hearing a voice call out to me from across the table, I raised my head.

Sendai-san's notebook, which was normally filled with answers to her homework, looked the same as it had a while ago—mostly blank, with little writing since the last time I checked.

「Undo your button.」

I gave Sendai-san an order, hoping it would make her stop acting differently and return to her usual self.

「My button?」

「The button on your blouse.」

「You're such a pervert, Miyagi.」

She responded with something I hadn't expected. Was asking her to undo one button on her blouse really that big of a deal? It wasn't like I was going to do it for her, so it felt like she was overreacting.

But seeing how she wasn't unbuttoning anything, I realized that my words might not have been conveyed correctly.

「I didn't mean it like that.」

「Like what?」

「I wasn't asking you to undo all of them. Besides, aren't you the one who's being perverted for assuming that's what I meant?」

「I never said that's what I thought you meant.」

「You didn't say it, but I bet that's what you were thinking.」

"That's true," she admitted after I pressed her on it.

「So then, how many did you want me to unbutton?」

「Just one.」

「You're fine with just one?」

Sendai-san stared at me as she asked, as if seeking confirmation from me.

'It's not like you'd do it even if I told you to unbutton two.'

The third button was more of a wildcard—sometimes it was okay to ask her to undo it, and other times, it wasn't. I wasn't sure what the situation was today, but it wasn't as if I actually wanted

her to unbutton it. Even if I did, it's not like she would have been willing to, anyway.

「I don't know how many you want to unbutton, Sendai-san, but it's alright if you keep the rest fastened.」

「I see. That's fine, then.」

Sendai-san said as she undid one button on her blouse.

「Is this okay with you?」

「Yeah.」

Sendai-san, who always kept her second button fastened at school, had now unbuttoned it in my room, just like she usually did. Yet, the unease lingered. Something still felt off—different from how things were before summer break.

I wasn't trying to stare, but I couldn't look away. My eyes were fixed on her, as if searching for what had changed.

「What's up?」

Sendai-san asked with a suspicious tone in her voice.

She was reacting the same way she usually did.

It was unsettling not being able to pinpoint what exactly was making me uneasy.

「Do you want me to do your hair for you again?」

Sendai-san's words broke the silence and brought me to a sudden realization.

Come to think of it, Sendai-san usually had her hair down during summer break…

I was used to seeing Sendai-san with her hair braided when she wore her school uniform, but since she often left it unbraided during the break, my memories of her felt slightly distorted.

「No, but you should let your hair down, Sendai-san.」

「Why?」

「No reason. But it's not like letting your hair down is that hard, right?」

"I guess you're right," Sendai-san replied as she untied her hair.

Perhaps it was because her hair was usually braided, but her slightly wavy, brown hair—lighter than mine—wasn't as straight as it had been during summer vacation. Still, it was enough to reconcile the image I had of her now.

「And lastly… just act like you always do.」

I had nothing else I wanted to order her to do, so I simply left the rest up to Sendai-san.

「What do you mean "act like I always do"?」

「I don't know, just talk about something.」

「Does that mean I can talk about anything I want?」

「Sure.」

To be honest, I had asked Sendai-san to come over without having any specific order in mind to give her.

But I couldn't just tell her that. If she found out, it would only make her suspicious. Even if I thought of giving her a random order, I hesitated, knowing it could easily lead to a repeat of what happened on the last day of summer break. I knew I could simply avoid calling Sendai-san over if I didn't have any orders for her, but that was something I wanted to save as a last resort.

As long as it fulfilled the order quota, I didn't really care what Sendai-san wanted to talk about.

「Hmm, let's see…」

Sendai-san groaned, clearly struggling to come up with something to talk about. After a brief pause, she finally said,

「Which universities are you applying to? Don't tell me you're still undecided.」

I frowned as soon as Sendai-san brought up a topic I wasn't eager to discuss. Maybe she mentioned it precisely because she knew I didn't want to talk about it.

「You're the one who told me to find something to talk about, so you should at least give me an answer.」

It was a little awkward for me since I'd chosen a random school on a whim, but it wasn't as if I was trying to hide my plans. Besides, even if I stayed quiet now, she'd find out eventually.

Slightly regretting that I hadn't been more specific with the conversation topics, I replied that I was planning to attend a local university.

「What about you, Sendai-san?」

I didn't really want to know, but if I didn't ask, there'd be nothing left to talk about.

「I'm planning on going to a university outside of the prefecture.」

Sendai-san replied, adding the name of the university afterward.

「Wait, are you serious?」

The university Sendai-san mentioned wasn't one that could be entered just by being smart. To my knowledge, no one from our high school had ever been admitted, and I doubted Sendai-san would be the first.

「Nope, I was just kidding. Well, I was aiming for it at one point, but I knew it was impossible.」

Sendai-san responded with a smile.

「But you were aiming for it.」

「It was never going to happen.」

I thought she might be joking, but since she didn't deny it, she was likely serious about aiming for that university. I didn't understand why she was targeting that particular school, but considering she was still attending prep classes diligently, there was a chance she was still interested in going for it.

「You're the only one I've told about this, Miyagi. Keep it a secret.」

「I won't tell anyone. It's not like I have anyone else to tell anyway.」

「That's true.」

Still, I found this a bit troubling.

We already had plenty of secrets between us; I didn't need any more. The more secrets we accumulated, the heavier they became, making it harder for me to move forward. It was starting to feel like I couldn't go anywhere without Sendai-san being around.

「So then, what university are you actually planning to apply to?」

I asked, hoping to lighten the weight of the new secret we had just created. Sendai-san then mentioned the name of another university outside the prefecture. This time, it was a school she had a good chance of getting into, which made me realize there was some truth to what she had said earlier.

Still…

Given her grades, her choice made sense and was what I had expected, but hearing her say the name of a university outside the prefecture out loud left me with an uneasy feeling.

Though I was uneasy about the new secret I shared with Sendai-san, what was consuming my thoughts now was her choice of university. It was gnawing at my mind and leaving me with a lingering sense of discomfort.

「Hey, Miyagi. Why don't you apply to the same university as

me? 」

Sendai-san casually suggested something that seemed impossible for someone like me. Considering my grades, getting into that school was no easy feat.

「 You say it like it's so easy. We both know it's impossible for me. 」

「 That's not true. 」

「 I don't really want to go out of my way to apply for a school that I know I can't get into. 」

「 You won't know unless you try, right? Just make sure you have a backup school and it'll be fine. You've been studying a lot more lately too, so I think if you pushed yourself a little more, you'll actually have a decent chance of getting in. 」

「 There's no reason for us to go to the same school, is there? 」

「 That's true, but I still think if you're able to, you might as well try and get into a good school. 」

「 That's not happening. 」

I didn't want to put in the effort into applying for a good university.

Besides, this relationship of ours would end as soon as we graduated from high school.

There was no point in us attending the same university.

Sendai-san should've known that too.

The fact that she was planning to apply to a university outside our prefecture was also none of my business.

It was absolutely and definitely none of my concern whatsoever.

「 We're moving on from this topic. I have another order for

you.」

I didn't have any other orders in mind, but I wanted to steer the conversation away from this pointless discussion about our futures, so I needed to come up with something quickly.

「There's more?」

「Yeah, so listen up.」

「I'll do whatever you tell me to.」

Sendai-san replied, not bothering to hide the expression on her face that looked like she still had more she wanted to say.

It's Sendai-san's Fault That I'm Losing Sleep (II)

Part 68

Let me think… What's a harmless order I can give her?

I shut my textbook, racking my brain for ideas.

If I didn't come up with something quickly, Sendai-san would bring up more pointless topics.

I averted my gaze from Sendai-san, who was sitting in front of me, and searched my room for inspiration. My eyes moved from the bed to the dresser, before finally settling on something from the bookshelf.

「Read me a book.」

「Which book?」

「Anything that's seems boring.」

「Really? Not the opposite?」

「I want something that's boring enough to put me to sleep.」

「Oh, that's what you're going for.」

Realizing she was being used as a substitute for a lullaby, Sendai-san got up, walked over to the bookshelf, and, without any hesitation, picked out a book before sitting down next to the bed.

「Is this one okay?」

The light novel Sendai-san was holding was one I bought because she mentioned liking the main character, but I found the story uninteresting and never finished it.

「Yeah, read that one.」

I gave Sendai-san an order as I took a seat on my bed.

「Okay.」

Her slender fingers opened the book that had been collecting dust on my bookshelf.

Sendai-san was seated next to my pillow with her legs crossed, allowing me to see her side profile.

Then, the room was filled with the sound of pages turning and Sendai-san's voice as she read the story out loud.

I'd given her this order many times before, and Sendai-san read the light novel smoothly, just as she always did. Her voice was neither too loud nor too quiet—it was perfect for the room. Her soft voice sounded much gentler here than it did in the classroom, and I found it very pleasant to listen to.

The way Sendai-san read the light novel made it feel like we were back to the time before summer break started.

I didn't know what she found so interesting about the light novel, but normally, I'd be lying down and fast asleep by now. However, today I couldn't fall asleep. I didn't even feel like lying down.

It wasn't Sendai-san's fault, though.

It was my own problem.

Once we graduate, I won't be able to hear her voice anymore.

Even though I was the one who set a strict deadline for our arrangement, Sendai-san was going to a place farther than I had expected, and I suddenly started to worry about every little thing.

I knew it meant we wouldn't run into each other by chance anymore, but at the same time, I couldn't quite understand it.

「Weren't you going to sleep?」

The dull story came to an abrupt halt, and somehow, the conversation shifted to why I wasn't lying down.

「Yeah, so keep going.」

I rested my head on the bed, feeling no hint of sleepiness, as Sendai-san's hand reached out toward me. Without hesitation, she began to stroke my hair. I pushed her hand away.

「Keep reading.」

Sendai-san didn't reply but continued the story from where she had left off.

The sound of her clear voice tickled my ears.

I didn't feel like sleeping, so I kept my eyes open and stared at Sendai-san instead.

Her beautiful, long hair fell across her face, which I found to be obstructive.

I was starting to think maybe I shouldn't have ordered her to put her hair down.

I moved to the edge of the bed towards Sendai-san, and her voice started to sound much closer.

My gaze was fixated on the buttons of her blouse.

I could only catch a glimpse of her collarbone now, though I had seen more of her skin before.

On a day hotter than today during summer break, I had asked Sendai-san to take off her clothes, and she had done so without hesitation.

But from now on, we wouldn't be doing things like that anymore, and I'd never see her body again.

I reached out to Sendai-san and pulled on her hair.

The thought of going to university seemed far more boring than the story being read to me.

「What were you looking at?」

I expected her to complain that it hurt, but instead, she said something completely different.

「I was just looking at you since you're sitting right in front of me.」

「Hmm…」

My straightforward reply might've sounded suspicious to her, but she didn't seem to have anything else to say. She placed the light novel on the bed, turned to face me, and let out a small sigh before starting to tug on my bangs.

「Close your eyes already. You said you were going to sleep, weren't you?」

Sendai-san covered my eyes with her hand.

The room that had been bright a moment ago suddenly went dark, and I couldn't see anything.

I grabbed her hand and pulled it away from my eyes.

Sendai-san was now directly in front of me.

I didn't mean for it to happen, but our eyes met.

—— She's too close.

The distance between us was even smaller than before.

I quickly let go of the hand I was holding, and in doing so, I accidentally knocked the light novel off the bed and onto the floor. The book fell with a thud, but Sendai-san didn't make any move to pick it up.

「Back away a little bit, Sendai-san.」

「But weren't you the one who tried to move closer first?」

She was right. I was the first one to try and get closer to her.

I'll admit that much.

But I don't remember us ever getting this close.

It felt like Sendai-san was peering right at me.

「Even if that's true, you're inching closer to me too, aren't you, Sendai-san?」

「Hmm, am I?」

「You definitely are. You don't need to be this close to read the book to me.」

I said as I pushed Sendai-san away by her shoulders, but she didn't seem to listen.

Instead, she reached her hand out and touched my earlobe.

She caressed it gently, then pinched it and tugged on it.

Her fingertips slid behind my ear, making it feel extremely ticklish.

Sendai-san's hand kept touching me gently, as if to remind me of what happened over summer break, causing me to swat her arm away.

「Sorry.」

Sendai-san looked surprised for a moment, but quickly apologized. Then, she sat back down on the floor.

「Pick that up.」

I said as I sat up and pointed to the book on the floor, and Sendai-san obediently picked it up. She opened it and flipped through the pages, stopping where she had presumably left off.

「I'll read you the rest.」

Sendai-san said with a monotone voice.

「You don't have to read it anymore.」

「I thought you were going to sleep?」

「No, I'm not going to.」

It was more like I couldn't fall asleep even if I wanted to, but there was no reason to tell her that. I took the book from Sendai-san's hand and placed it on the pillow.

My homework was still unfinished, but I didn't feel like getting out of bed. Even though she was now empty-handed, Sendai-san didn't seem interested in moving to the table, either.

Since the order had come to a half-hearted and abrupt end, the room fell silent. It was an awkward silence, and I felt restless, unable to sit still. Desperate to do something, I began tapping my fingertips on the book.

Tap, tap…

That was the only sound echoing in the room.

Sendai-san leaned against the bed, using it like a backrest.

From where I sat on the bed, I could see the top of Sendai-san's head, which I usually wouldn't be able to see. Just as I was about to reach out and touch her, Sendai-san suddenly said, "Oh, right," as if she had just remembered something.

「Has your class decided what they're doing for the cultural festival yet, Miyagi?」

She began discussing a school event coming up next month, and I seized the opportunity to keep the conversation going.

「Nope. What about your class, Sendai-san?」

「My class doesn't seem very motivated, so we're thinking of putting together some sort of exhibit and calling it a day.」

「Sounds nice.」

The conversation she suddenly started was much better than

sitting in silence, so I wanted to keep it going.

If I had known we could have such a calm and pleasant conversation earlier, I would have wished we'd started it sooner. Talking about this was far better than discussing something as stressful as the entrance exams. Even though there was still a bit of awkwardness, we were gradually returning to our usual way of interacting.

「Is it different for your class, Miyagi?」

「Well, since it's everyone's last high school cultural festival, they seem eager to do something memorable.」

Personally, I thought it was kind of a pain.

About half of my classmates were enthusiastic and brainstorming ideas for the festival, while the other half seemed content with a more laid-back approach. However, since those who are most vocal often steer the conversation and make the decisions, no one was willing to voice any complaints.

「Does that include you, Miyagi?」

「Not really. I'd prefer doing something simple.」

「If you want something nice and easy, you should join my class.」

Sendai-san turned around and said with a grin.

"It would've been nice if we were in the same class."

Seeing the smile on her face nearly made me say it out loud, but I managed to catch myself.

「I think it's about time we finished our homework.」

Sendai-san said as she glanced over at the table.

「I don't feel like doing it.」

「In that case, do you want me to go back to reading the book to you?」

「… Never mind, homework it is.」

「Alright, then come over here.」

「I would've moved even if you hadn't told me to.」

I said as I got off the bed and sat across from Sendai-san.

It's Sendai-san's Fault That I'm Losing Sleep (III)

Part 69

Sendai-san had brought up the topic of going to university once right before the start of summer vacation. I had already expected that she wanted to attend a university outside the prefecture.

What she said the other day simply confirmed what I already knew, but I couldn't help feeling shocked nonetheless.

More accurately, what I found most shocking was that it was still bothering me, even though it was something I had already expected to hear.

I could guess why Sendai-san wanted to attend a university outside the prefecture. It likely had something to do with what I saw when I visited her house during summer vacation.

She wanted to get away from home.

At least, that's what I think.

If my guess is right, then there wasn't anything I could do to change Sendai-san's mind.

… No.

This isn't right.

It wasn't that I wanted to change Sendai-san's career path, and even if I did, there was no point in trying. Our relationship would end as soon as we graduated from high school. Besides, her career choice was hers to make—it wasn't something I had any say in.

Even though I knew all that, I hadn't moved an inch since Sendai-san went home earlier. I'd been sitting in the same spot

where she had been before she left.

We didn't have dinner together today, so I hadn't eaten yet.

But I wasn't hungry.

I slowly got up, grabbed a change of clothes, and headed for the bathroom. I felt that taking a long bath would lead to more unnecessary thoughts, so I decided to take a quick shower before heading to bed.

At this rate, I'd have no trouble getting into the university I wanted to apply to. I wasn't good enough to attend the same university as Sendai-san, but since I wasn't aiming for a prestigious school anyway, it wasn't an issue for me.

Sendai-san was way too concerned with my business and tried to interfere too much.

Earlier, she had casually suggested that we apply to the same university, even though she didn't know my grades. While I was confident my father would agree to let me attend a university outside the prefecture, my current grades made it clear that I had no chance of getting in. Even with the studying I did over summer vacation, it would be far too difficult. I'd bet that if Sendai-san saw my scores on the upcoming midterm exams, she'd agree with me.

It'd be a waste of time to apply to a university I knew I couldn't get into.

「Ugh, why am I even thinking so seriously about this?」

After tossing and turning for a while, I turned off the lights.

My father still hadn't come home yet.

I couldn't help but feel a little uneasy whenever all the lights in the apartment were out.

「Everything's fine.」

'I'm not scared,' I thought to myself as I closed my eyes.

I wasn't sleepy at all, probably because I went to bed much

earlier than usual. Still, I closed my eyes, hoping I could fall asleep anyway.

One sheep, two sheep.

I tried the age-old method of counting sheep, but sleepiness never came. In the end, I only managed to doze off briefly late into the night, and without getting a proper night's rest, it was already time for school.

I entered the classroom while my sleep-deprived mind was still in a daze.

Even an hour into class, my head still felt foggy, and I couldn't retain anything the teacher was saying. Before I knew it, third period had ended, and Maika was calling out to me.

「Let's go, Shiori.」

「Huh?」

「Our next class is in the audiovisual room.」

「Oh, right.」

I quickly grabbed my textbook and notebook and stood up. Before I could double-check that I had everything, Ami took hold of my arm and pulled me out of the classroom and down the hallway.

I wasn't the type to go to bed or wake up early, but I usually slept at a reasonable time. It wasn't normal for me to feel this groggy and sleep-deprived, having my mornings ruined like this.

It was all Sendai-san's fault that I couldn't pull myself together.

Her talking as if she could decide my future for me was what made me so tired and unable to focus in class.

It was so irritating.

To vent my frustration, I stomped down the hallway, but the sound of my footsteps helped clear my foggy mind. After shaking off some of the haze, I started walking briskly again when I heard Ami

call out to me.

「Shiori, look in front of you.」

「In front of me?」

「Come here.」

Maika pulled me aside by the arm, causing my body to tilt slightly.

I shifted my focus from my feet to what was directly in front of me.

I made eye contact with Sendai-san.

—— Huh? Sendai-san?

But how?

… Wait, no, it's not weird to see her here.

Since we went to the same school, running into Sendai-san wasn't unusual, but it was the first time we had ever made eye contact while at school.

While I was preoccupied with being surprised by both the obvious and the unexpected, I suddenly realized I had bumped into Sendai-san, who had been diagonally in front of me.

「Whoa!」

It was more than just a bump—it actually hurt because our shoulders collided. Since Maika was still holding my arm after pulling me away earlier, she managed to keep me from falling.

「Are you okay, Shiori?」

Maika asked as she helped me regain my balance.

「I'm fine.」

I replied as I adjusted my posture.

When I looked back at Sendai-san, I saw that Ibaraki-san and her other friends had joined the scene.

「You alright, Hazuki?」

「Yeah.」

I couldn't take my eyes off Ibaraki-san, who was having a conversation with Sendai-san similar to the one Maika and I were having.

—— The spot next to Sendai-san belongs to me.

The thought briefly crossed my mind, but I immediately tried to brush it away as I heard a familiar voice calling out to me.

「I'm sorry. Are you okay?」

Sendai-san stared at me and asked with an aloof tone.

We weren't allowed to act too familiar with each other.

I knew that, but I wasn't good at dealing with her when she was like this.

I turned my gaze away from Sendai-san.

「… Yeah, I'm fine. I'm sorry as well. I was spacing out.」

If blame had to be assigned between the two of us, it was probably my fault.

Even though I was looking right in front of me, I wasn't watching where I was going.

Maika and Ami had repeatedly warned me to pay attention while walking, but I was so distracted that I didn't notice. Though, if I had to pinpoint the reason for my distraction, it was all because of Sendai-san, but I couldn't say that.

「Are you okay as well?」

I asked, repeating the words that had been said many times in the past few minutes, but for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to

say Sendai-san's name out loud.

「Yeah, I'm good. I'll help you pick those up.」

Sendai-san said as she picked up a textbook that had fallen on the floor. Watching her do this made me realize I no longer had my textbook or notebook in my hands.

「Sorry. I'll pick them up myself.」

I squatted down to pick up my notebook, but as I reached for my pencil case, Sendai-san grabbed my wrist.

「I'll get it for you.」

Sendai-san said in a gentle tone.

But she wouldn't let go of my wrist.

She was holding onto it so tightly that it was starting to hurt.

「No, I'll get it myself.」

If we were in my room, I would've demanded she let go. But since we were at school, I tried to handle it more politely.

「Oh, sorry.」

The hand that had been gripping my wrist tightly finally released its hold.

「Did you get everything?」

Sendai-san asked as she gave my textbook back to me.

「Yeah, I did. Thanks.」

「Don't worry about it.」

Sendai-san flashed a doll-like smile before walking away. She quickly vanished from view, leaving only the sound of Ibaraki-san's voice echoing down the hallway.

I brushed the dirt off my textbook, notebook, and pencil case

before calling out to Maika and Ami.

「Let's go.」

「—— Did you do something to upset Sendai-san?」

Maika tapped me on the shoulder and asked with a curious look on her face.

「What do you mean?」

「She was staring you down and grabbing you by the wrist. Are you sure you didn't upset her?」

「Isn't it just because I walked right into her? It did hurt quite a bit.」

I couldn't imagine that Sendai-san was staring me that hard.

It did hurt when she gripped my wrist, but it hadn't left a mark.

I couldn't understand why Sendai-san had done that, though.

I glanced at my wrist where she had grabbed me.

It looked exactly the same as it did before I bumped into Sendai-san.

I sighed, wishing that there had been something left behind that wouldn't fade away.

Chapter 22

Miyagi Seriously Doesn't Know When to Hold Back (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 70

That was the first time I ever talked to Miyagi at school.

Sure, there was that one time I pulled her aside, but I considered that just an extension of our usual time together. But this was different—it was the first time we'd spoken in front of our friends.

It shouldn't have been a big deal, but for some reason, I couldn't stop thinking about it, and it was driving me nuts. I felt like turning around, even though there was no real reason to.

「Hazuki, you're acting a little spaced out. You sure you're okay?」

Umina's unexpectedly loud voice caught my attention, and I turned to look at her next to me.

「Sorry, I was just thinking about something.」

「You're gonna bump into someone again like this.」

Umina let out a playful laugh as she joked. "Yeah, you're right," I replied, and we kept walking down the hallway.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't hear Miyagi's voice anymore. All that reached me were Umina and Mariko's voices.

「What's that girl's name again? Miyagi, right? Are you guys close?」

Umina asked, as if the thought had just occurred to her.

「Yeah, that was Miyagi, but I wouldn't say we're close or anything.」

「Really? But you guys hung out during summer break.」

「Huh? Who?」

「You and Miyagi.」

「Are you sure you didn't mistake me for someone else?」

Since I was so used to lying, the words slipped out naturally.

「Come on, I could never mistake you for someone else, Hazuki.」

Umina must've been sure of what she saw, as she kept pushing the issue.

「I remembered because you guys were hanging out in such an unusual area.」

Umina then mentioned the name of a train station—the same one Miyagi and I visited during summer break. We had watched a movie there together, so she wasn't mistaken about having seen us.

「Now that you mention it…」

As we approached the classroom, I scrambled to think of a way to cover up the lie I'd just told.

「I have family in that area, so I was there visiting them, and I just happened to run into Miyagi.」

「Oh, you have family there too? I actually have a cousin who lives near that station.」

Mariko said as we entered the classroom, not bothering to stop at her own desk. Umina, looking disappointed, murmured, "So even you forget things sometimes, huh, Hazuki?"

「I'm only human, after all.」

「Well, I don't really care if you guys are close or not, but I was just curious if she was the reason we didn't hang out much over the break.」

Umina asked as she took a seat and gave me a bitter look. I didn't go to my own desk; instead, I stayed and continued chatting with her.

「Didn't you say you were busy with prep school, Umina? Why were you even in that area?」

「I was on a date with my boyfriend.」

「All the way out there?」

「We wanted to go somewhere different for a change. Plus, we didn't want to run into other people from our school, so we picked somewhere out of the way.」

Miyagi's plan had backfired.

She had deliberately chosen a place where we were unlikely to run into anyone we knew.

But what were the odds that Umina, of all people, had been thinking the same thing?

「Sounds like you two get along well. I'm kind of jealous.」

Umina didn't seem interested in getting me to talk about Miyagi again, but I didn't want to bring up how this conversation began.

So, I decided to move the conversation along with a smile. It looked like my attempt had lifted Umina's mood a bit. With the topic of Miyagi out of her mind, she started sharing details about where she and her boyfriend had gone that day and what they had eaten.

I wasn't the type to get jealous of other people's happiness, but since I wasn't particularly interested in Umina's stories, her voice soon faded into background noise.

I dropped my gaze to my hands.

Unsurprisingly, there were no traces of Miyagi left on me.

「Did you get hurt when you guys ran into each other earlier?」

Mariko asked, likely because she saw that I was fixated on my hands.

「Nope, I'm fine.」

「You sure?」

「Yeah, see?」

I said as I waved my hands around.

「Looks good to me. I guess this means you'll still be able to hold hands with your boyfriend.」

「I told you, I'm not seeing anyone.」

「I know. Hurry up and find someone already.」

「Even if I do find someone, it doesn't guarantee we'll hold hands.」

「Huh? Why not?」

Mariko wore a puzzled look on her face.

「Do you guys really like to hold hands that often?」

I asked the two of them without directing the question to either one specifically.

There wasn't any deeper meaning behind my question, and I doubted their answers would be of any real use to me.

Miyagi immediately came to mind, but she wasn't my lover, and I had no desire to walk around hand-in-hand with her. Yet, I found myself conscious of her whenever we were together, as I had been earlier.

「Holding hands with your lover is pretty normal, isn't it?」

Umina said, and Mariko followed up with, "Yeah, especially when you're on a date."

「Oh, I get it. Hazuki, you just want a relationship so pure that even the idea of holding hands is too much.」

Mariko said playfully, extending her hand towards me, and I took it in mine.

Mariko's hand felt similar to Miyagi's—warm and soft. I imagined Umina's hands were probably the same.

But there was something about Miyagi's hands that just felt different.

I didn't want to hold hands with her, but sometimes I had a strong urge to touch her. For example, when we bumped into each other in the hallway earlier, I instinctively grabbed her hand. These feelings were far from the purity Mariko talked about.

「Wait, did you find someone you like?」

Umina asked, her face lit up with curiosity.

Oh, this is such a pain…

Even if I were to say no, they would likely reply with something like, "But there must be someone you're interested in, right?"

「Come on, who is it?」

I could hear the delight in Mariko's voice, but just as I was about to give a half-hearted response, the bell rang.

「Look, class is about to start.」

Fortunately, I was saved by the bell. I went to my desk, sat down, and the teacher walked in right after.

As class started, the teacher's voice was the only sound filling the room. I copied the notes from the blackboard into my notebook,

but my right hand couldn't help but write 'Miyagi' in the margin before I quickly erased it.

'I want to be able to talk to her at school too…'

The sound of my voice echoed in my head, overshadowing the teacher's.

'… This is ridiculous.'

There was nothing to talk about with Miyagi at school. Even when it was just the two of us, we hardly ever had anything to talk about.

I tried to clear my mind of these distracting thoughts and turned to a page in my textbook. As I focused on filling in my notebook, class eventually ended. When I stood up to join Umina and the others for lunch, I heard a notification on my phone and pulled it out of my bag to check.

I settled back into my seat and glanced at the screen. As always, Miyagi's message had once again filled up my after-school schedule. Being summoned two days in a row was unusual, but today it didn't surprise me.

I had grabbed her wrist in the hallway earlier.

She was probably going to press me on that.

The problem was, even I couldn't explain why I felt compelled to grab her wrist in front of everyone. I could say I just wanted to touch her, but I doubted Miyagi would accept that answer and would probably question why I wanted to touch her.

'I just didn't want to hand you back to your friends.'

There was no way I could admit that there were deeper feelings at work. If I had to measure them, they'd be roughly the size of konpeito. Nonetheless, it was inappropriate to harbor these feelings, especially for Miyagi.

After responding to Miyagi's message to let her know I'd be coming over, I stood up again.

The mere thought of her questioning me about what happened in the hallway earlier was giving me a headache.

This is such a hassle…

Even so, seeing Miyagi didn't feel like a hassle in itself.

Miyagi Seriously Doesn't Know When to Hold Back (II)

Part 71

As soon as I entered Miyagi's room, I undid a button on my blouse.

The atmosphere between us still felt awkward, but I was slowly adjusting to it.

After Miyagi handed me a five-thousand-yen bill, I sat in my usual spot. Miyagi brought over glasses of barley tea and soda, placing them on the table. After a moment's hesitation, she took a seat next to me, a bit farther away than usual. I felt a little relieved, seeing as how she'd been sitting across from me since summer vacation ended.

Things weren't entirely back to normal, but they were improving.

Sometimes, things didn't always work out the way I wanted them to, and that was okay.

As long as we acted the same way we had before summer break, my feelings should eventually return to how they used to be too.

Miyagi laid out her textbooks and assignments on the table in silence. I couldn't tell how motivated she was today, but she dove straight into her homework. I followed her lead and started on mine as well.

Yesterday, I had carelessly suggested to Miyagi that she should consider applying to the same university as me. She thought it was impossible for her to be accepted, and though I disagreed, I knew it would be difficult for her.

We'd been studying together ever since the start of summer break. Although the number of times Miyagi had to ask, "I don't get

this part. Explain it to me," had decreased, I still wasn't confident she would pass. That said, if she committed to working hard from now on, there might be a chance for her to get accepted. She would need to be very determined. If Miyagi asked for my help to get accepted into the same university as me, I'd gladly offer it, but I couldn't force it on her.

But even if we both ended up at the same school, it wouldn't necessarily mean we'd have anything to do with each other. Our relationship had a set end date, something I had agreed to from the start.

Still, for some reason, I thought it would be fun if Miyagi and I went to the same university.

「Sendai-san.」

I raised my head to look at Miyagi, who had called my name out.

「Was there something you didn't understand?」

「No, but what was up with you earlier today?」

Of course.

This was why Miyagi had called me two days in a row.

I knew the reason, but I pretended to be clueless.

「What are you referring to?」

「You grabbed my wrist when we were in the hallway, didn't you?」

「I was just trying to help you pick up what you dropped.」

「Sure, but you didn't need to grab my wrist for that, right?」

「What do you mean? My hand just bumped into yours by accident.」

「That was definitely not "just a bump."」

What a pain.

I didn't want her to dig deeper and force me to say things I preferred to keep buried. Even if I told Miyagi the truth, it wasn't going to sit well with her.

'I just didn't want to hand you back to your friends.'

It was best for both of us if I kept these feelings to myself.

「… What do you want me to say then? I'll tell you anything you want to hear.」

I said, hoping to resolve the situation with some kind of middle ground.

If there was something she wanted me to say, I'd say it if it meant ending the conversation right away. Dragging this out wouldn't make either of us happy, so it was best to wrap it up quickly, even if my response was half-hearted.

But I knew Miyagi wouldn't be satisfied with that sort of answer.

「That's not what I want from you.」

「Okay, then what do you want?」

「Tell me the reason why you grabbed my wrist.」

「I just wanted to touch you, that's all.」

I decided to tell her half the reason why I had grabbed her wrist earlier.

「What? Answer me seriously.」

「I just did.」

「Fine, then tell me why you wanted to touch me.」

You'd be better off not asking me that.

That way, we can carry on in peace.

「Miyagi, why are you asking me this when you already know I'm not going to give you an answer?」

I asked, trying to put an end to her relentless questioning, but she stayed silent. I was left with no choice but to continue with,

「I don't need a reason to want to touch you, do I? Sometimes, I just feel like doing it.」

I said as I reached out to Miyagi.

Even though we were sitting a bit farther apart than usual, she was still close enough for me to touch. I brushed her cheek with my palm. Miyagi's face twisted in discomfort, but I didn't pull my hand away.

The warmth from our skin touching was pleasant, so I slid my hand from her cheek to her neck. I wasn't planning to go further than this, but I knew my feelings for Miyagi were far from pure.

「It's not like I ever touch you just because "I feel like it."」

「Miyagi, if you put it that way, doesn't it imply that there's always a reason when you touch me?」

「I――」

Miyagi appeared to be at a loss for words, but instead of saying anything, she quietly moved my hand away from her.

「I don't get you, Sendai-san. Everything you do, whether it's at school or in here, just doesn't make sense.」

Miyagi mumbled quietly as she lowered her gaze.

「I don't understand it myself. —— Just hurry up and give me an order for today.」

I wasn't confident I could keep going like this without something happening. Whenever I was around Miyagi, it would feel as if the screws that held my rationality together were coming loose.

Although we were beginning to adjust to the new shape our relationship was taking, we still hadn't returned to its original form. Even the slightest provocation could easily shatter it.

I'd rather be ordered around than risk something worse happening. Miyagi would probably just give a trivial order anyway, which was better than whatever was happening right now.

「Okay, then let me pierce your ears.」

Miyagi spoke without flinching or looking up, catching me so off guard that I ended up repeating what she said.

「Pierce my ears?」

「Yeah. I'll pierce your ears for you, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi lifted her head and tugged on my earlobe.

Was this her way of getting payback because I had touched her ears yesterday?

「No. Absolutely not.」

I stood my ground against Miyagi.

I didn't want anything that would leave a mark on my body. Especially not a piercing.

I knew Miyagi was eager to leave any kind of mark she could on me, and she had done so many times before. I had put up with it until now, but only because the marks faded quickly.

But piercings were different.

I was not able to tolerate this as I had in the past.

「Why not?」

「Because having piercings is against school rules.」

Miyagi's hand showed no sign of restraint as it continued to softly touch my ear, so I grabbed her arm. When I pulled her hand away, her fingers released my earlobe with little resistance, but she

didn't sound willing to give up.

「But you wear your skirt shorter than what's allowed and dyed your hair. Aren't you already breaking the rules?」

「I think I'm still somewhat adhering to them.」

「You're always like this, Sendai-san.」

「Like what?」

「You adjust the rules to fit your own standards and act like that's just how it should be.」

「Isn't it okay to stretch the rules a little? The teachers don't seem to care much about my skirt or my hair, so I'm not really violating any rules.」

The school rules weren't as strict as they seemed.

The official guidelines were one thing, but the teachers who enforced them were more relaxed. As long as you mostly complied with the rules, you wouldn't get into trouble.

All I did was establish a new boundary for the rules and ensured I stayed within it.

「That's not fair.」

「If that's what you think, then why don't you give it a try too? I bet you'd look cuter if you wore your skirt a little shorter.」

I grabbed Miyagi's skirt, which was hanging at a medium length, and tugged it gently. Before I could adjust it to a shorter length that wouldn't get her in trouble, she slapped the back of my hand.

「There's nothing wrong with this length. That aside, it doesn't have to be today, but let me pierce your ears sometime.」

「No, give me a different order. I'm considering this one against the rules.」

I said firmly.

But Miyagi didn’t look like she was ready to give up.

Miyagi Seriously Doesn't Know When to Hold Back (III)

Part 72

I wasn't going to agree to this, no matter what.

Even though Miyagi didn't come right out and say it, her words made it clear she wasn't backing down from trying to get me to pierce my ears. Still, no matter how much she insisted, my response stayed the same. While I obeyed most of her other orders, there were some things I simply couldn't accept.

「I'm never going to let you pierce my ears.」

I said, making sure to emphasize every word.

「Why do you consider me piercing your ears as breaking the rules?」

「Anything that leaves a lasting mark is against the rules, and I see this as an act of violence. Wait, what kind of earrings were you trying to get me to wear anyway? Show me.」

I had no intention of obeying Miyagi's order, but I was curious about the sort of earrings she had in mind. But instead of showing me anything, she spoke in a quieter tone than before.

「I don't have any earrings for you right now, but I'll go and buy some if you let me pierce your ears.」

「No, you don't have to do that. But why are you so eager to pierce my ears then?」

「… I just wanted to run an experiment. I wanted to see if the teachers would notice and get angry. I think you could use a bit of scolding every now and then.」

Miyagi gave an excuse that may or may not be true, but it wasn't a very interesting reason. Either way, it was something I

needed to complain about.

「You shouldn't use people for your experiments. Find a better reason.」

「If I come up with one, does that mean you'll let me do it?」

「No.」

I wasn't sure what Miyagi's true intentions were, but letting her pierce my ears was a bit too extreme for an order.

If we were to end up at different universities, never to see each other again, I didn't want to have a lasting mark on my body. I didn't want the time we spent together to be permanently engraved on me.

「Fine, then don't move for a second.」

Miyagi said, but her words left me feeling uneasy.

「What are you planning to do?」

I asked, but there was no reply.

She reached her arm out towards me.

But instead of touching my ear, she placed her hand on my shoulder.

Hold on, was her goal this whole time to leave a mark on me?

Even though Miyagi was right in front of me, I still couldn't figure out what was going on in her head. We'd managed to make more conversations compared to the first time I came over, but her thoughts were just as elusive as ever.

With Miyagi not even having the earrings she wanted me to wear on hand, I couldn't tell if she was being impulsive or if she'd been planning to give this order for a while, but only managed to bring it up now.

It was hard for both of us to express our thoughts and feelings through words alone. But closing the physical distance between us

always seemed effortless.

With her lips inches from my ear, Miyagi's black hair shifted slightly, releasing a gentle scent of shampoo that filled the air between us.

The feel of her lips, having touched me so many times before, seemed almost natural to my body. It was starting to seem normal to have Miyagi this close, but a part of me still knew better than to fully accept it.

「Wait, Miyagi.」

I pushed Miyagi away by her shoulder.

As the warmth of her touch dissipated, her voice whispered softly near my ear.

「Since you won't let me pierce your ears, I'll just settle for this instead.」

Her voice was so close that my hand on her trembled. Her breath gently tickled my ear.

「All you need to do is keep quiet and stay still. I won't leave any wounds on you, so this order should be easy to follow.」

She said, her voice as clear and crisp as ever, and then a moist sensation grazed my ear. I could tell immediately that it was her tongue pressing firmly against my skin. The warmth of her tongue against my ear left me feeling restless, causing me to shiver. Even though she'd done this to me before, I was torn between listening to my sense of reason and convincing myself that this order wasn't worth defying.

Ultimately choosing to remain silent, I soon felt something hard pressing against my earlobe.

It was probably her teeth, and whenever something like this happened, it never ended well.

「Back off, Miyagi.」

I tried to push Miyagi away, remembering how things had

gone before, but she wouldn't budge. Instead, she bit down hard on my earlobe.

「Hey, that hurts!」

I exclaimed, hitting her shoulder in protest, but she only bit down harder. It felt as if she was putting all her strength into it.

I'd never experienced ear pain quite like this before; it was so intense, it felt like it would be seared into my memory forever.

Yet, it wasn't just the pain I'd remember, but also the overwhelming heat.

Her breath and the fragrance of her shampoo blurred together, becoming almost indistinguishable.

「I told you, that really hurts!」

I smacked Miyagi's body, causing her to flinch.

The gap between us, which had been closed so easily, was just as easy to widen.

「Miyagi, you bite way too hard. That hurt more than getting a piercing—it felt like you were trying to rip my whole ear off.」

「I don't think I bit you that hard.」

I'd never had my ears pierced before, but I couldn't imagine it hurting more than what I had just experienced. That's how hard Miyagi was biting my ear. I had no idea where this urge of hers even came from.

「I see you were lying about not leaving any wounds on me. You're such an idiot, Miyagi.」

It felt like she had caused a wound, so I touched my earlobe and examined my fingertips.

But to my surprise, there was no blood.

I could hardly believe it.

Still, it felt like I was bleeding, so I tried to grab a tissue from under the table, only to find that the box with the crocodile cover had suddenly vanished.

「Hey, don't take that away from me.」

I complained to Miyagi, who was holding the crocodile in her hands.

「I didn't leave any wounds on you.」

Miyagi said, as if to justify herself, and placed the tissue box on the table.

If I had to guess, she was probably unhappy with the way I disobeyed her order.

Yet, at the same time, it felt like Miyagi had changed.

In the past, it seemed like Miyagi only took pleasure in making me do things I didn't want to do, but it felt different now. She didn't seem to be enjoying herself at all; instead, she looked like she was riddled with anxiety.

It felt incredibly selfish of her to start acting all meek after doing something so terrible to me.

She was reaping what she had sown, so there was no need for me to give in.

「Just because you're making that face doesn't mean I'll forgive you.」

I said as I grabbed a tissue from the crocodile on the table and wiped my ear.

The thin paper stayed clean, showing no signs of blood.

「I don't think I look any different from usual.」

Miyagi said – clearly wearing a different expression than usual – as she tried to take the crocodile away from me, prompting me to slap her hand away.

「Why don't you take a look in the mirror, then?」

「I'll pass.」

Miyagi's face clouded even further. She looked as sad as an abandoned puppy or kitten, and I felt a pang of guilt as if I had done something wrong.

「—— Fine, just don't make it hurt so much this time.」

My words came out as if I was excusing Miyagi's actions.

We shouldn't be acting like this with each other, but maybe a little indulgence wouldn't hurt.

To be clear, this wasn't what I wanted—it was Miyagi's fault for making me feel this way; she just looked so helpless.

「Are you sure?」

「I mean, it's supposed to be an order, right?」

I pulled on Miyagi's blouse, as if signaling my intention to obey her orders.

Right. I'm just following her orders. There's nothing I can do about it.

As long as it adhered to our rules, I had no right to refuse, so I had no choice but to comply.

「Okay, then be quiet and stay still.」

Repeating the same words she had said earlier, her body heat drew closer once more.

A lukewarm sensation hesitantly brushed against my ear, as if trying to soothe the pain from her bite. Her tongue traced the spots where her teeth had been. No matter how many times her tongue pulled away and returned, I didn't feel particularly disgusted.

Her teeth grazed my ear once more.

I felt the pain start to resurface, and I instinctively clutched

Miyagi's arm.

This time, though, her bite was much gentler. She pinched my ear repeatedly, each bite slightly firmer than the last, as if to test my tolerance. Despite this, it was clear she wasn't trying to hurt me —her touch remained soft and careful.

The sensation wasn't strong, but it consumed my thoughts, making me restless as I felt the nerves in my ear intensify.

I could hear Miyagi's breathing so closely that it was making my chest flutter.

Despite that, I couldn't help but feel at ease knowing Miyagi was close by.

But this was becoming overwhelming for me.

This kind of stimulation wasn't appropriate for the sort of relationship we had.

Miyagi was taking this too far.

I hadn't said she could do whatever she wanted as long as it wasn't painful, so I pushed her forehead away from my body.

「Hold on, Miyagi. That didn't hurt, but this is just getting too risky.」

「Are you—」

It looked like Miyagi was about to say something, but then suddenly stopped. Instead, she gave me a rare, honest apology and said, "I'm sorry."

After taking a few shallow breaths, I positioned the crocodile between us. I pulled a tissue from its back and wiped my ear, as if to erase any traces of Miyagi.

「How did that make you feel just now, Sendai-san?」

Miyagi asked while caressing the crocodile's head.

Despite having shown she could hold back her words earlier,

she still decided to ask such a thoughtless question, which made me want to sigh.

「How about you experience it for yourself?」

I extended my hand towards Miyagi – who was acting like she wasn't responsible for any of this – to touch her ear, but she pulled her body away sharply before I could even reach her.

「Come on, it was just a joke.」

I said nonchalantly while attempting to brush it off with a laugh.

If we were to go any further than this, it would only make things even more awkward between us.

It was best to take back my unnecessary suggestion and pass it off as a joke.

However, Miyagi responded in a very serious tone.

「—— I'll allow it, but only if you let me pierce your ears for you.」

I couldn't help but stare at her, surprised that she was letting me do to her what she had done to me – as long as I agreed to let her pierce my ears in return.

Her offer was incredibly tempting, and for a moment, I hesitated. But then a wave of disgust washed over me for even entertaining the idea.

「Don't be ridiculous. Anyway, did you know that Umina saw us together?」

I chose to steer away from the risky situation by changing the topic. Miyagi's attention immediately shifted the moment I mentioned Umina's name.

「When did she see us?」

「The day we went to the movies. Turns out, Umina was in the area too, so I told her it was just a coincidence we ran into each

other.」

「And she bought it?」

「Probably. Not that it matters to me either way.」

「You're right. It doesn't matter since we won't be hanging out again anyway.」

Miyagi said with a cold tone in her voice as she tapped the crocodile's head.

I leaned my back against the bed, noticing her sulky expression.

「Admit it—you really want us to go somewhere together again, don't you?」

I said, a bit too confidently, to which I was immediately shot down with,

「I'm never going anywhere with you again.」

At times like these, Miyagi would always pull back as quickly as the receding tide. Her retreats were always so abrupt and decisive that it scared me. I couldn't tell if she acted like this with everyone or just with me, so it felt like there was no room for me to say anything.

It seemed cruel that she would try to get closer to me whenever she felt like it, only to push me away as soon as she was satisfied, without any regard for my feelings.

「Yeah, there's nowhere for us to go together anyway.」

Those weren't the words I wanted to say, but nothing better came to mind. I sighed as I picked up the crocodile and tossed it at Miyagi.

Chapter 23

I'll Be Fine Even If I Don't Get To See Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 73

I watched as Sendai-san pulled books from the shelf and put them back. She had been doing this for quite a while now, per my instructions. Every now and then, she'd complain about the heat, but I chose to ignore it. It was surprisingly hot for mid-September, but if I lowered the AC any further, I knew I'd start feeling cold.

I had ordered her to organize my bookshelf.

It was a task anyone could do, but it wasn't really what I wanted her to be doing. Still, I knew that if I gave orders recklessly, there was a chance things could go too far, so I had no choice but to stick with mundane tasks that couldn't escalate. Lately, the orders I'd been giving her felt more like a formality than anything else.

「Miyagi, where do you want me to put this?」

Sendai-san turned around and showed me the manga she was referring to.

「Just put it wherever you want to.」

I answered from my spot on the floor beside the table.

I did have my own way of organizing my books. Normally, I'd sort them by genre or keep my favorite ones within easy reach, but there was no reason to tell Sendai-san that. I'd asked her to organize my bookshelf several times before, and each time, her arrangement was practical enough that I didn't feel the need to say anything.

「That's not exactly helpful.」

Sendai-san complained as she put the book in her hands back

on the shelf.

She appeared to be really skilled at this, arranging the books like she was playing a puzzle game, fitting each one into place perfectly.

She seemed like the type to be good at games, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

As I watched Sendai-san, I thought back to the time we played a video game together.

Then, my attention was drawn to her ears.

In the end, Sendai-san didn't let me pierce them.

Ibaraki-san had her ears pierced, and many other girls did too. Although it was against school rules, piercings were quite common among students. Sendai-san seemed like the type who would get her ears pierced eventually, so she might as well have let me done it for her.

But I wasn't surprised that Sendai-san refused to follow this order.

Just because I gave her five-thousand-yen didn't mean I could demand literally anything from her.

There were still limits to what I could ask her to do.

I knew that, but even after a week had passed, I still wished I could have pierced her ears.

「Oh, right. Have you figured out what you're going to do about university?」

Sendai-san asked without turning around.

「What do you mean?」

「If you're interested in applying to the same university as me, I'll help you with studying.」

「I'm not interested.」

Even if we ended up at the same university and spent time together as we do now, it would likely all end once we graduated. There's also a chance Sendai-san might get fed up before then. If that were the case, it would be better to end things sooner rather than later. I'd rather be the one to call it off before she could, so it wouldn't hurt as much.

「I see.」

Sendai-san spoke with a neutral tone while she continued to fill the gaps on the bookshelf.

「But I'll keep studying. I'll have to take the entrance exam anyway, so I might as well put in the effort.」

Everything I said was true.

I used to have Sendai-san handle all my homework, but I was doing it all myself now. It wasn't something I had been eager to do, yet I managed to complete today's assignments that were on the table.

「Even if we end up applying to different universities, I'll still help you with anything you don't understand.」

「You don't need to concern yourself with me, Sendai-san. Just focus on your own studies.」

「I was planning to do that anyway.」

Sendai-san answered without turning around.

Her arms, exposed by her short-sleeved blouse, looked just as they did over summer break—untanned and free of any marks. It was difficult to believe she had walked all the way to my place.

I had left a mark on her arm back when she was wearing long sleeves, but it had faded after just a few days. Piercings, on the other hand, would stay much longer. If I could leave a permanent mark where everyone could see, it would put my mind at ease, no matter who was with her.

Sendai-san and I never talked at school, but I wanted

something that would show part of her time belonged to me.

—— I never know when to give up, do I.

I knew that no matter what I did, Sendai-san would never let me pierce her ears, but I couldn't let go of the thought. I was acting no better than a child throwing a tantrum over not getting their way.

「Okay, I'm done.」

Sendai-san said as she turned around.

Her arms, sticking out of her blouse, were as pale as always, and her ears remained unmarked. The bookshelf behind her was organized a little differently than I would have done, but everything was neatly in place.

「So, has your class decided what they're going to do for the cultural festival yet, Miyagi?」

Sendai-san asked as she took a seat next to me.

「Apparently, we're going to be doing a café.」

The teachers hadn't said it directly, but there was an unspoken expectation that third-year students shouldn't put too much energy into the cultural festival. They probably wanted us to prioritize studying for the entrance exams, but every year, some classes would ignore that and go all out anyway. This year, our class was one of them.

「That sounds like it's going to be a lot of work to prepare for and handle on the day of.」

Sendai-san said with a hint of sympathy in her voice.

「Yeah, it's going to be such a pain. There are a lot of preparations that need to be made. Just thinking about it is making me depressed.」

「Are you guys going to be making maid outfits too?」

「It's not supposed to be a maid café, so we're not going to go

that far.」

「What a shame. I would've been there in a heartbeat if it meant being able to see you in a maid outfit, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san said with a laugh, though she didn't sound all that interested.

「If we had decided on a maid café, I would just stick to working from behind the scenes.」

I couldn't oppose the idea since it was what the more popular students in my class wanted to do, but even managing a regular café was a lot of work. The thought of serving Sendai-san while dressed in a maid outfit was something I really didn't want to deal with.

「So, you'll be working as a waitress?」

「Yeah, we're going to be taking shifts.」

「Hmm, maybe I should pay a visit to your class after all.」

「You really don't need to.」

「You say that, but I bet you actually want me to visit.」

「No, don't come.」

Sendai-san sounded amused and like she was having fun, but it was likely all superficial.

There were bound to be other classes from different grades running their own cafés. There was no reason for her to visit ours, especially since we had agreed not to speak to each other at school. It was obvious she was only saying it to tease me.

I found this part about her incredibly annoying.

「Anyway, my class is going to start preparing for it next week, so there might be a few days where I'll have to stay late after school.」

I couldn't put up with all the nonsense Sendai-san was saying anymore, so I decided to tell her what I had to say.

「Does that mean you won't be asking me to come over until after the cultural festival is over?」

「You're still attending prep school, right? If our schedules don't match up, then that's just how it has to be.」

With midterm exams coming up right after the cultural festival, we weren't going to be making preparations every single day after school. Nevertheless, it made coordinating our schedules a lot harder than usual.

「Got it.」

Hearing her respond in her usual tone made me feel like my heart was being clutched and suffocated.

Sendai-san had mentioned that her class was planning to put up some sort of exhibit for the cultural festival, but that didn't mean they weren't going to make any sort of preparations at all. On top of that, she still had to attend prep school on certain days.

Since those plans were non-negotiable and Sendai-san likely had no intention of changing them, her replying with, "Got it," was not surprising to me at all.

I understood where she was coming from, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

With both preparing for the cultural festival and her needing to attend prep school, it was tough for us to line up our schedules.

There's a chance Sendai-san won't be able to come to my room for a while.

With just under two weeks until the cultural festival, our time apart would be short, similar to a winter or spring break. Given that we had managed without seeing each other for that long before, Sendai-san's nonchalant attitude probably came from viewing this as a normal occurrence.

So, it was strange that I felt sad at all, even if it was only for a brief moment.

Maybe it was just all in my head.

There was no reason for me to feel lonely over this, and it didn't make sense for Sendai-san to feel that way either.

「I don't want to study anymore. I wish our exams were over already.」

I said as I flipped through Sendai-san's textbook on the table. Somehow, treating it as if it were my own helped me calm my agitated emotions.

Everything seemed like such a bother that even wishing for the cultural festival and exams to disappear was starting to feel like too much work.

「Hey, don't flip through the pages without asking me first.」

Despite Sendai-san's complaints and the pokes from her pencil, I kept turning the pages of the textbook, until she gave me a sharp jab that made me pull my hand away.

'What if we exchanged textbooks?'

On days we had class, I could use Sendai-san's textbook, but it was very different from mine. It was filled with notes, and her neat handwriting would make it obvious to anyone that it didn't belong to me.

Wait, no.

Why am I even thinking about exchanging it with her in the first place?

Maybe it was because, unlike before, we had spent the entire summer vacation together. I had gotten so used to Sendai-san's presence that the thought of not seeing her for a while was making me feel sentimental. That was probably it.

I silently observed Sendai-san as she concentrated on her textbook and notebook.

She was wearing her necktie and had two buttons of her blouse undone, with part of her hair neatly braided just like usual.

I reached over and tugged on her slightly loosened necktie.

「I have one more order for you. Take this off.」

「… Why? Are you going to tie me up again?」

Sendai-san asked, her tone incredibly wary.

「No.」

Unlike piercings, swapping neckties wouldn't leave any visible marks.

It was incredibly strange that I even felt the need to exchange something with her at all, but I still wanted to do it.

I needed something to hold onto, at least until the cultural festival.

I'll Be Fine Even If I Don't Get To See Sendai-san (II)

Part 74

I took off my necktie and placed it down on the table.

「I thought I was supposed to be the one taking my necktie off.」

Sendai-san said with a confused look on her face.

「We're exchanging them.」

「… Why do you want to trade neckties?」

「I don't need a reason for it, do I? Isn't it normal to just want to do something like this sometimes?」

「Not usually, no.」

「Sendai-san, if you can touch me without needing a reason, why can't I swap neckties with you "just because I feel like it?"」

It was odd that Sendai-san was making a big deal out of it when I was just using her own logic against her. Nevertheless, she didn't make any effort to remove her necktie and continued to press me for an answer.

「So, are you saying you don't have a reason?」

「You talk too much, Sendai-san. Just shut up and take off your necktie already.」

She was beginning to get on my nerves, so I pulled harder on her necktie, and she responded with,

「Sure, sure.」

Even though she didn't seem entirely convinced, she still took

her necktie off and placed it around my neck.

Neckties were a standard part of our uniform, something everyone had to wear. It was just a simple piece of cloth, but the one around my neck right now somehow felt a bit heavier than my own.

「Are you satisfied now?」

Sendai-san murmured as she reached for the necktie I had left on the table, but I quickly grabbed it before she could take it.

It didn't feel like enough to satisfy me; after all, our uniform included more than just the necktie.

「I thought we were supposed to be exchanging them. Don't just swipe it from me.」

Sendai-san said, pointing out what should have been the logical outcome, as she tried to snatch the tie back from me.

「Let's swap blouses too.」

Neckties and blouses were essentially the same—just basic parts of our uniform, both made of fabric. Since we were already swapping one piece of our uniforms, why not exchange another? So, there was nothing weird about trading blouses.

Truthfully, I knew I was being irrational, and there was a chance Sendai-san might get angry at me.

I knew I should avoid giving these kinds of orders at all costs.

Yet, I couldn't stop myself from wanting to hear the answer I already knew I would get from her.

「You want me to take it off?」

Sendai-san asked, pausing in her tracks.

「If you can swap our blouses without taking them off, then go ahead.」

「What, like some kind of magic trick?」

「Well, if you can't manage that, then you'll have to take it off.」

I said as I handed her my tie.

Sendai-san took it, rolled it up, and set it back on the table. I expected her to snap back with, "Are you crazy?" but instead, she remained silent.

Technically, I wasn't ordering her to undress—we were just swapping parts of our uniform—but I wasn't sure if this broke any of our rules.

I was depending on Sendai-san to decide whether it was acceptable or not.

My orders, which had to follow the rules we set, sometimes crossed the line, but we always managed to overlook it by forcing ourselves to turn a blind eye. But after summer vacation, there were certain orders I just couldn't bring myself to give anymore, even if they stayed well within the rules.

The line between what was and wasn't acceptable had blurred, making it hard to tell where the boundary was. Still, Sendai-san usually refused the orders she strongly disagreed with, so the orders I gave her always ended up being halfway in between.

「Just to be clear, we're going to be exchanging these, right?」

Sendai-san said, after giving it some thought.

「Yep.」

「Okay, fine. I'll do it as long as we're actually exchanging them.」

Sendai-san was quick to betray the faith I placed in her as she unfastened the buttons on her blouse, one by one.

Even though the order I'd given her was technically acceptable, it was something she should've refused.

Sendai-san should have been aware of that too, but for some reason, she chose to go along with it. I needed her to be the one to put a stop to it, or else things would just continue as they were, and I wouldn't intervene. All I could do was watch as the buttons kept coming off.

Sendai-san took off her blouse with less hesitation than she did during summer break.

Unlike last time, there were no words being exchanged between us.

With Sendai-san remaining silent, all I could do was stare at her.

Her undergarments were white, similar to what she wore on that rainy day, though I wasn't sure if they were the exact same ones.

Her breasts, concealed by the undergarments, were nicely shaped.

Come to think of it, during summer vacation, Sendai-san had touched my chest over my undergarments, but I never got to do the same to her, so somehow, I feel like I missed out.

If I stretched my hand out right now, I could touch her anywhere I wanted to. I would be able to feel the softness of her breasts and the smoothness of her sides.

「Hurry up and take yours off too, Miyagi.」

As if to interrupt my impure thoughts, Sendai-san handed me her blouse. When I hesitated, she tapped my arm with her fingertips, so I took her hand.

I'd never felt this way about anyone before, but I really wanted to touch Sendai-san's body.

I slowly ran my hand down her upper arm. Her skin was softer than gummy candy and felt more elastic than a marshmallow under my fingertips. But I couldn't bring myself to touch her chest or sides. Before I could get the chance to touch her anywhere else, Sendai-san pulled her arm back and handed me the blouse again.

「We're supposed to be trading blouses, right? Hurry up and take yours off already.」

Sendai-san said in a grumpy tone.

I took her blouse from her hands and set it, along with the tie around my neck, on the bed. Then, I stood up, walked to my closet, and opened it.

「Hey, Miyagi.」

I heard her complain about me not giving her a replacement blouse to wear, but I ignored it. Instead, I took out a piece of clothing from my closet and gave it to Sendai-san.

「Here you go.」

「Wait, who said you could just give me a different one? That's not fair.」

The piece of clothing I handed to Sendai-san was a white blouse, the same one that belonged to our school uniform. Being in my room, I was able to grab a fresh blouse from the closet without needing to take the one I was currently wearing off.

「There's nothing unfair about this at all. You should hurry up and get dressed.」

「No, this is definitely unfair. Take your blouse off, Miyagi.」

「I never said I was going to give you the one I was wearing right now.」

「… You're so stingy, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san's displeasure was clear as she frowned, but she soon relented and unfolded the blouse I had given her. She glared at it with a bitter expression before shooting me the same look.

At first, she seemed like she was about to complain, but ultimately chose to remain silent instead. She put on the blouse and necktie, making sure to leave the first two buttons unfastened.

Sendai-san tugged at the blouse's sleeves, as if the clothes were uncomfortable on her, and once again muttered, "You really are stingy."

I'll Be Fine Even If I Don't Get To See Sendai-san (III)

Part 75

The tie around my neck was neither too tight nor too loose, yet I couldn't shake the feeling of discomfort. If I had to guess, it was probably because this piece of fabric didn't belong to me.

I tugged at the necktie.

Sendai-san's tie looked and felt exactly like mine. Maika and Ami hadn't noticed I was wearing someone else's, and no one else would either—it was just an ordinary tie.

Only Sendai-san and I knew that our ties were different.

「Shiori, that's dangerous. You should stop focusing on your tie and watch where you're going.」

Maika said, tugging my arm. I had been completely fixated on the tie, but her voice snapped me out of it, bringing me back to reality. All the sounds I had tuned out suddenly came rushing in.

The chatter of passersby and the hum of cars filled my ears at once, making my mind buzz, and I remembered we were on our way to the mall.

Oh right, we were going shopping.

I let go of my tie and looked straight ahead.

The cultural festival was just around the corner, and even though I wasn't thrilled about it, we were busy getting things ready. Earlier, a classmate suggested we add more decorations to the signs, so I found myself having to spend the afternoon shopping for supplies.

「If you keep spacing out like that, you're going to bump into someone again, just like last time with Sendai-san.」

Ami said with a laugh, and Maika, sounding a little unimpressed, joined in with,

「Never mind other people; you could end up getting hit by a bike if you're not careful, so make sure you're watching where you're going.」

「I'm sorry.」

Among the people in uniforms and suits on the sidewalk, several bicycles were weaving through the crowd. They weren't traveling that fast, but being hit by one would still hurt.

I wasn't concerned about missing the cultural festival, but getting hit by a bike and having to go to the hospital would be a hassle. It didn't matter if I ended up as an outpatient or inpatient—I'd prefer to avoid it completely.

I hadn't met with Sendai-san once since the other day.

With both the cultural festival preparations and her prep school lessons, our schedules never seemed to match. I tried reaching out to Sendai-san multiple times, but each time she'd say she had prep school, forcing us to reschedule. Yet, even those rescheduled plans often fell through due to festival preparations. If I were to end up in the hospital, our plans would be delayed even more.

「You've been really fixated on your necktie lately. Did something happen?」

Maika asked while pointing at the tie.

「No, nothing happened. I was just making sure I tied it properly.」

I took a large step forward, trying to escape the intense gaze piercing into my chest. But Ami, ensuring I couldn't get away, grabbed me by the shoulder.

「That's a little suspicious. You've never been this concerned about your appearance before. Why the sudden change?」

「It's not that big of a deal. I just thought it looked a bit weird. By the way, what were we supposed to buy again?」

Unable to come up with an excuse on the spot, I cut the conversation short and took the chance to rid my mind of the necktie that had been making me feel uneasy.

「Don't worry, I wrote it all down.」

Maika pulled a folded piece of paper from her skirt pocket. When I glanced at the note, which had been attached to a notebook not too long ago, it was packed with items I couldn't figure out the purpose of. If we bought everything on the list, we'd end up with a lot to carry back, but it was still better than working in the classroom.

We grumbled about various things as we made our way to the mall.

It wasn't as hot today as it had been in the height of summer, but my blouse still clung uncomfortably to my back. Unlike with her tie, I couldn't bring myself to wear Sendai-san's blouse for some reason, so it remained tucked away in my closet. Meanwhile, I couldn't help but wonder what Sendai-san had done with my tie and blouse.

I'd caught occasional glimpses of her around school, but I couldn't tell who those parts of her uniform belonged to just by looking.

I wanted to see her and ask her directly what she had done with my uniform.

「I just want this cultural festival to be over with already.」

I mumbled quietly, but Ami responded with,

「Getting ready for it is a hassle, but the festival itself is pretty fun.」

「Since it's our last one, let's visit as many places as possible.」

「I mean, it's not like I'm not looking forward to it or

anything… 」

While Ami and Maika sounded excited, I could only manage to give a lukewarm reply.

It wasn't that I disliked the cultural festival—I had fun in the previous years. However, it was hard for me to get excited and join in the cheer of, "Let's make this a great festival!" with the rest of the class when, in reality, only a select few were actually responsible for handling the work.

It would've been fine if the popular kids were the only ones hyped about the festival, but instead, we were all dragged into their excitement.

If only I didn't have to go shopping today – I could've invited Sendai-san over to my place.

Even if I rushed home now, it would be too late to call her over, but I still wanted to go home anyway.

While I was absorbed in negative thoughts, I heard Ami's optimistic voice say,

「 Well, let's just take our time with the shopping before we head back. 」

「 Ami, you know we're not here to shop for ourselves, right? 」

Maika said as she waved the piece of scrap paper in front of her face.

「 Oh, come on. Shopping for this stuff's going to be a piece of cake. I bet we can get it done quickly and still have time to kill before we need to go back. 」

「 You sure seem relaxed about this. 」

「 I mean, there's no reason to take this errand that seriously. You agree with me, right, Shiori? 」

「 Yeah, I guess so. 」

I wasn't planning to adopt Ami's easygoing attitude, but there was no point in stressing over things we couldn't avoid. It was better to finish the shopping quickly and then do something fun together before heading back.

The three of us entered the shopping mall together.

Maika collected a bunch of materials I barely recognized, marking them off her list as she went. Ami and I, on the other hand, were reduced to mere pack mules, shuffling behind her like mindless drones, carrying out our tasks.

「You guys want to get something to drink?」

With Maika handling most of the shopping, we finished quickly, so Ami suggested we head to the food court next.

Leading the way, she set off, and as we rode the escalator, our conversation turned to small talk.

As we walked by a variety store, I found myself stopping in front of it. Normally, I'd overlook these kinds of shops, but today, a necklace with a small charm on a silver chain caught my attention—it seemed perfect for Sendai-san.

Before I realized it, my feet were moving towards the store, while Maika's voice echoed from behind.

「What's up? Did something catch your eye?」

「Oh, no.」

I answered immediately, and Ami, who had almost left me behind, came back.

「Would it have been better if we'd gotten you an accessory for your birthday instead?」

「If I had known you wanted that, I would've gotten it for you.」

Maika sounded disappointed in herself, but I quickly reassured her otherwise.

I genuinely appreciated the pencil case and book cover they gave me for my birthday last week. I had been using the pencil case ever since I got it, and the book cover was on the novel I was currently reading. Since I had specifically asked for these items, there was no way I would have preferred an accessory over them.

「Oh, no, I don't actually want it. It just caught my eye, that's all.」

Right, it was just something that reminded me of Sendai-san when I saw it. I could've easily bought the necklace with the five-thousand yen I usually gave her, but it wasn't the kind of thing I could just buy and give her out of the blue. Besides, giving her a necklace felt too personal, and there was no reason to do that. If I knew when her birthday was, maybe I could've used that as an excuse, but I'd never asked about it before.

… And even if I did know when her birthday was, I still wouldn't give it to her.

We didn't have the kind of relationship where it was normal for us to exchange gifts. If I had no intention of giving her anything, there was no reason to even think about what might suit her.

「Want to go in and take a look?」

Maika asked, but I gave a brief reply.

「No, I'm good.」

「Okay, let's keep going then.」

Ami said, already walking ahead.

「Are you sure you don't want to check it out?」

Maika asked again, but my answer stayed the same. There was no point in looking, and no reason to change my mind.

I'll Be Fine Even If I Don't Get To See Sendai-san (IV)

Part 76

Sendai-san never showed up.

I hadn't been waiting for her these past two days, but she never stopped by my classroom once during the cultural festival.

'Maybe I should pay your class a visit,' she'd joked the last time we met, but I knew she wasn't the type to go out of her way just to see me, which was why I hadn't expected her. But now, with the festival over and the cleanup finished, I couldn't help but think that, in the end, she hadn't come.

Still, I had fun at the festival this year.

Maika, Ami, and I wandered into the first-year classrooms, places we usually had no reason to visit, and we watched some performances in the gym. Running a café was a hassle, but I'm sure I'll look back on it fondly someday. Everything I enjoyed about the festival had nothing to do with Sendai-san.

The only reason her words lingered in my mind was because she'd said something strange, but whether Sendai-san showed up or not didn't matter to me. I had a good time, and I was about to grab dinner with Maika and Ami before heading home, so why should I care about Sendai-san?

I didn't think much of her anyway. She was probably off with Ibaraki-san and their crew, celebrating at some loud, obnoxious after-party right now.

I took off the apron I had used as my cafe uniform, followed by the matching T-shirt my classmates and I had been wearing. Then, I changed into my school uniform. Now that it was October, we had switched to our autumn uniforms, trading short sleeves for long ones.

In the end, I never got the opportunity to wear Sendai-san's blouse, and the one in my closet would never be used again.

「Shiori, are you done changing?」

As I lingered in the corner of the classroom – where half of our classmates had already left – I heard Maika's voice calling out to me.

「Yeah.」

I said as I put Sendai-san's necktie on and picked up my bag.

「Okay, let's get going then. I'm starving.」

Ami said, and the three of us left the classroom together.

Unlike during the busy festival, the hallway was now quiet, and our footsteps echoed as we went down the stairs. As we reached the shoe lockers, I heard my phone chime in my bag.

「Was that your phone, Shiori?」

I nodded in response to Maika's question and came to a stop. Taking my phone out of my bag, I glanced at the screen and saw Sendai-san's name.

『Are you still at school?』

She had never been the first to message me before.

I clutched the necktie tightly in my hand.

This was also the first time she had ever asked me something like this.

Why does it matter whether I'm at school or not? What if I wasn't here anymore?

I was unsure how to interpret her message, as it was the first time she'd asked me something like this. But I knew hesitating wouldn't get me anywhere, so I answered with, "I am," and her response came almost immediately.

『I'll be waiting at the same place as last time.』

We weren't close enough at school to even have a designated meeting spot, but I instantly knew which place she meant.

Though it only happened once, I did meet with Sendai-san at school before.

The music preparation room.

That was probably where she was waiting.

「Sorry, I think I left something behind. Also, I can't hang out today. It looks like my father's coming home early.」

My excuse probably sounded forced, but it was the only thing I could come up with on the spot, and I turned away immediately after saying it.

「Aw, come on. We can go with you to get whatever it is you left behind, so you should come to dinner with us.」

Hearing Ami's voice close behind, I turned around and said,

「My father said he wants me home right away. I'm really sorry, but you two should go ahead and have dinner without me.」

I pressed my palms together as if making a heartfelt request, and Maika answered right away with:

「If you can't make it, we can just reschedule for another day. Is that alright with you, Ami?」

「Okay, we can plan for another time. But we can at least come with you to grab what you forgot.」

「Oh, no, it's fine. I wouldn't want to take up more of your time. I'll just go by myself.」

I apologized to them once again, and despite Ami's hesitant expression, she eventually gave in.

「Alright, we'll head home without you then. What other days work for you?」

「You two can decide first, and I'll adjust my schedule around it.」

「Got it, I'll talk it over with Maika then.」

「Thanks, and sorry for the trouble.」

I waved goodbye to them before heading towards the old school building.

With most of the students having gone home, the school was strangely desolate, almost as if we had stepped into another realm. Although the sun was setting, it was still bright outside, keeping the hallways well-lit. However, as I approached the old school building, the decreasing number of students made me uneasy, so I started walking faster, as if to escape the sound of my own footsteps. When I reached the music preparation room and opened the door, Sendai-san was there, blending in with the instruments, waiting for me.

As I approached Sendai-san, who stood in the light, she called out to me.

「Long time no see.」

We'd passed by each other in the hallways several times, so it hadn't been that long since we'd last seen each other.

「I thought we agreed we wouldn't speak to each other at school.」

「If you really felt that way, you could've just stayed away and told me you weren't coming.」

Sendai-san smiled as she casually leaned against a shelf filled with polished instruments.

「Did you have some kind of business with me? You called me here because you wanted to talk, right?」

I could've texted back with, "I'm not coming," but even I wasn't sure why I didn't. In fact, my body had already started moving before I had the chance to respond to her last message. I wasn't going to let Sendai-san know that, though.

「I thought we could enjoy the cultural festival together.」

Sendai-san said with a slightly forced tone in her voice as she gently tapped an instrument that I couldn't imagine the sound of.

「The festival's over, so there's nothing left for us to "enjoy" together. I don't find jokes like that funny, so if you don't have anything else to say, I'm going home.」

「No, I'm not done yet.」

Sendai-san narrowed the distance between us, and I instinctively backed away, but she grabbed the sleeve of my blouse.

「If I told you that the truth was, I really wanted to spend time with you at the cultural festival, would you laugh, Miyagi?」

Just as I was about to snap back at her, I realized that while Sendai-san's tone wasn't entirely earnest, she wasn't joking either, which made it hard for me to respond. But the mood between us felt too tense for me to remain silent, so I answered with,

「I would.」

「Yeah, I get it. I'd probably laugh too if you said the same thing to me.」

「… But you never came to my class.」

Sendai-san and I both knew it was impossible for us to go around the cultural festival together, but if she genuinely felt that way, she should've at least made the effort to visit my class.

But the reality was, she never stopped by. She was probably just messing with me, like she always did.

「I never promised that I would.」

Sendai-san's cold response only served to drive my point home.

「Never mind, I'm just going to go.」

I tried to shove Sendai-san away by pushing her shoulder, but with us being so close, she wouldn't let go of my sleeve.

「You see, Umina and the others kept dragging me around to all the places they wanted to see.」

「So? What's your point?」

「I'm just explaining why I didn't stop by.」

「I didn't ask for an explanation, and frankly, I don't care.」

「I thought maybe you'd want to know.」

「I don't. I just want to go home, so let go.」

「I'm not letting go.」

Sendai-san narrowed the gap between us, her hand that had been clutching my blouse now gripping my arm tightly as she pulled me toward her.

I didn't mean to move, but I lost my balance and stumbled forward. It was just a small step—only a few centimeters—but it brought me closer to Sendai-san. She took advantage of that and reduced the gap even further, bringing our lips so close they nearly touched.

It wasn't an accident; she was clearly doing it on purpose. I instinctively turned my face away, but Sendai-san had no intention of letting me get away. She leaned in once more, prompting me to shove her away as hard as I could.

「We can't do things like this.」

'No more kissing.'

We never made it a rule or anything, but it just feels like that's how things should be.

「You're saying that after kissing me during summer break?」

「Summer vacation's long gone. I'm not kissing you

anymore.」

“That so?” Sendai-san mused to herself as she tugged at the tie around my neck.

「This is mine, isn’t it?」

「So what if it is?」

「You wanted my necktie and blouse so badly that you made me undress on the spot, but you won’t even kiss me?」

「I didn’t want them that bad, and I didn’t force you to undress. We were just exchanging them.」

My stern reply caused Sendai-san to retort with a hint of frustration.

「Well, it’s time to swap back. Give me back my tie and blouse. Take them off right now.」

「Isn’t it obvious that the blouse I’m wearing isn’t even yours? I’ll return both the blouse and tie later.」

「No.」

We had already switched to our autumn uniforms, trading short-sleeved blouses for long ones. The one I was wearing clearly wasn’t Sendai-san’s, and she knew that. But for some reason, she refused to back down.

「Give it back, right here, right now.」

「Don’t order me around.」

「I’m not ordering you around. I’m just telling you it’s time to swap back.」

「You’re wearing your autumn uniform too, aren’t you? How are you supposed to give me my blouse back?」

「I brought it with me. The necktie I’m wearing is yours, Miyagi, so I can give it back to you right now.」

「That has to be a lie. There's no way you brought my blouse with you to the cultural festival.」

「If you think I'm lying, why don't you find out for yourself? It's in my bag over there. Feel free to go and have a look.」

As Sendai-san spoke, she turned her attention to the shelf lined with instruments. I followed her gaze and spotted a familiar bag sitting there.

There was no point in opening it and checking it.

Given how insistent she was, I had no doubt she had actually brought the blouse. Knowing her, it wouldn't surprise me at all if she had prepared it specifically for this.

「… What are you trying to get out of this?」

「If you let me kiss you right now, we can postpone the trade for another day.」

「That's not fair. If you had just told me you wanted to swap back today, I would've brought your blouse with me.」

「I don't want to hear that from you. You were being unfair the other day too when you didn't take off your blouse.」

「I never said I'd give you the one I was wearing.」

「And that's exactly what I found unfair, so I think it should be allowed to go both ways.」

Sendai-san was acting totally out of character.

She'd never said things like this before.

She'd often tried to get me to do what she wanted through roundabout methods, but she had never been so forceful with her demands before. I couldn't figure out what had caused this sudden change.

Was it because we hadn't seen each other until after the cultural festival ended?

That was the only explanation I could come up with, but I couldn't imagine that to be the reason why she was acting like this.

「No, it doesn't have to go both ways. Don't talk to me at school anymore, and stop doing things like this. You need to follow the rules, Sendai-san.」

Otherwise, you're going to drive me insane.

If Sendai-san didn't get it together soon, she was going to leave me feeling directionless, like a broken compass, and I might end up in a place I shouldn't be—one I might not be able to return from. With Sendai-san planning to leave me behind a few months from now, I didn't want to become any more involved with her than I already was.

「… It's your fault for looking like you were having such a great time at the cultural festival, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san mumbled quietly.

「How do you know I was having fun?」

「Because I was watching you.」

「Didn't you also have a good time, Sendai-san?」

When I saw her at last year's cultural festival, Sendai-san looked like she was having a blast, laughing with all her friends. I hadn't seen her at all during this year's festival, but I was sure it had been just as fun for her.

But for some reason, she didn't answer.

Instead, she loosened the grip she had on my arm.

「Look, if you're so opposed to being kissed that you feel you need to run away, then you can leave. I'm not interested in kissing someone who's so uncomfortable with it that they want to escape. If you want to go, then go. I'm not going to chase after you.」

「Are you saying I have to be the one to choose?」

「Exactly, and I'll accept whatever decision you make.」

「… You really are unfair, Sendai-san.」

She never made any decisions. She'd always leave the final say to me and wait to see what I would choose.

And even when she presented me with options, it felt as though the answer had been decided for me from the start.

「You'd better make up your mind soon, or else I might not let you choose anymore, you know?」

Sendai-san said as she released her grip on me.

Maika SS 3

Utsunomiya Maika, On the Way Home From School

(Maika PoV)
Part 76-extra

“Left something behind,” huh.

It sounded like something Shiori might do, but the way she’d been acting just now made it seem unlikely.

"Hi, Utsunomiya-sensei! May I ask for your opinion on something?"

Ami raised her hand like an eager elementary school student, her voice bouncing off the empty hallway.

I already knew what she was going to ask—it had to be something about Shiori.

“Sorry, I think I left something behind,” Shiori had said suddenly when we were on our way to the shoe lockers together.

Even though the cultural festival had just ended, the hallways were so eerily quiet now, it was hard to believe all that noise and excitement had ever even happened. The three of us had planned to grab some food at a fast food restaurant, but now Shiori was gone, leaving Ami and me behind. The silence around us made the lively atmosphere of the day feel like it had been nothing more than a dream.

"I know what you want to ask, Ami-sensei."

I replied, playing along as we walked over to the shoe lockers, switching out our indoor shoes.

"Aww, can’t we just stick with being student and teacher instead?"

"That’s what bothers you? Isn’t it fine if we’re both teachers? Come

on, Ami-sensei, why don't you give me your opinion first?"

"Fine, fine. Well, here's what I think——what if her going back for something she 'forgot' and that whole thing about her father were actually cover-ups for a boyfriend?"

That was a possibility I hadn't thought of.

Considering how unnaturally Shiori had brought up her father coming home early, I could see why Ami would jump to that conclusion.

"Shiori might have a boyfriend, huh…"

"Yeah, don't you think she's been acting kind of suspicious? We already made plans to have our own little after-party, but the moment she checked her phone, she suddenly said she forgot something. Then, right after that, she claimed her dad wanted her home as soon as possible, so she couldn't hang out with us. It feels like both were excuses, and in reality, her boyfriend asked to meet up."

"That… could be true."

Honestly, it was hard not to be suspicious. If she'd only mentioned forgetting something, I could've shrugged it off, but bringing up her father out of nowhere made it impossible not to raise an eyebrow.

"It's gotta be her boyfriend. You think so too, don't you, Maika?"

Ami declared confidently as we walked out of the school building together.

"But maybe she really did leave something behind, and her dad actually does want her home early. Shiori can be absentminded, and her father does often ask her to come back."

Shiori brought up her father a lot in conversation.

Today didn't quite seem like the right situation for it, but I couldn't dismiss the possibility completely. If anything, it felt more likely that her leaving something behind was the excuse, not the part about her father.

Of course, I was curious about why she'd made something up at all, but I was also fine letting it slide for now.

As we walked in the slowly fading daylight, Ami let out a sigh.

"Well, maybe you're right."

"And besides, if Shiori did get a boyfriend, don't you think she'd tell us?"

"Would she, though?"

"Yeah, so why don't we interrogate her about it tomorrow?"

I joked, glancing at Ami.

I didn't plan on forcing Shiori to share every detail of her love life, but I did want to know if she had a boyfriend. I wanted to see what kind of person she liked, and make sure they were someone I could trust her with.

Though, honestly, I didn't actually think she had a boyfriend.

"That's a good idea. Let's do that… Though, I don't actually think she has one or anything."

Ami said, almost as if she'd read my mind.

"I agree. Maybe we shouldn't interrogate her, then."

I replied.

Shiori had never mentioned liking anyone, and I'd never seen her act like she had a crush. She didn't really talk about romance at all, actually. Love was just one of those topics that never seemed to interest her much.

"No, let's do it. I think it'll be fun."

Ami said cheerfully.

"Oh, poor Shiori… is what I'd like to say, but yeah, let's do it—as punishment for ditching us."

I didn’t plan on going too hard on her, but since I was overlooking her odd excuses today, a little teasing seemed fair.

"Well then, it’s settled. Tomorrow, Shiori will face her fate! She’ll pay for leaving us behind!"

Ami said with a grin on her face.

Chapter 24

What I Want to Do With Miyagi and What Miyagi Wants to Do (I)

(Sendai PoV)

Part 77

I couldn't tell if Miyagi had made up her mind or just given up on deciding, but one thing was clear: she didn't run away.

Even after I let go of her arm, she remained standing in front of me.

I had only asked her to meet me in the music preparation room because I wanted to have a talk after watching her enjoy the cultural festival without me. I never had any intention of kissing her.

She'd waited for me throughout the two days of the festival.

That might not have been entirely accurate, but I never could've imagined that Miyagi would ever say anything that suggested she had. And because of that, what should've been a brief conversation had spiraled into something much more.

It was all Miyagi's fault for saying something so unexpected like that.

I never thought she'd remember something I had said half-jokingly, and I certainly didn't expect her to react the way she did. That was probably why I was getting so carried away now.

「Miyagi.」

I gently called her name as I caressed her cheek. Miyagi looked a little displeased, but she didn't pull away. I took it as a sign she wasn't against what I was about to do and slowly leaned in. Although she didn't move, her expression seemed like she wanted to complain.

「How about you close your eyes?」

「I don't need you to tell me that.」

Her voice carried a hint of dissatisfaction, and I could tell she wasn't planning on closing her eyes obediently. That was usually the case with her, so I pressed my palm against her cheek. Miyagi kept staring at me, showing no desire to shut her eyes. It was hard to picture her as someone about to be kissed.

But it wasn't like we had the kind of relationship where we needed to care about the mood between us.

I had no choice but to close my eyes first as I leaned in, pressing my lips against hers.

It felt just like the kisses we shared over summer break.

I was used to her softness and warmth, but something felt different this time—it was my heart. Maybe it was because we were at school, but my heartbeat was so loud it startled me. Unable to take it any longer, I broke away after a brief kiss, only for her to grab my arm.

I turned my gaze to the hand that clutched my arm tightly, but not with enough force to make me want to pull away. When I looked into Miyagi's eyes, it seemed like she wanted to bite me, but she didn't act on it. She didn't seem like she fully accepted me, but she wasn't rejecting me either. If Miyagi really wanted to bite me, she would've done so already.

So then, the reason why she's grabbing me must be because…

I lowered my gaze and stared at the hand that was holding my arm.

「Miyagi, that hurts.」

She didn't respond.

Even though she had to have heard me, she refused to let go of my arm. Instead, her grip tightened further, her nails digging into my skin.

When I looked at Miyagi, she wore a disgruntled expression on her face.

Let me try getting closer again.

Miyagi wasn't saying anything or moving at all.

But when I tried to back away, she yanked on my arm.

I didn't dislike the way Miyagi tried to keep me close with these small gestures.

「Can I do it again?」

I asked, even though I already knew the answer. Miyagi didn't say anything or nod; instead, she tugged on my arm, as if urging me to continue.

I didn't want to say it out loud because it'd be troublesome if she ran away, but I found her reaction cute.

I slowly leaned in, bringing our faces closer together. This time, Miyagi was the first to close her eyes as our lips met.

My heart continued to race loudly and quickly.

I had kissed Miyagi countless times before, enough that I was used to it by now.

But what I was feeling right now was probably nervousness.

Our lips had only been gently pressed together, with no force or tongue, yet the heat was intense. When I held Miyagi by the shoulders, the warmth spread to my hands. As more of her body brushed against mine, my heart raced wildly, refusing to calm down, and it felt almost suffocating.

I didn't want to break away yet, but as our lips parted, Miyagi continued to hold onto me. However, her grip was light, so it didn't hurt.

After a moment's hesitation about whether to kiss her again, I decided to press my lips against hers more firmly than before.

Miyagi made no attempt to run away, and I could feel my heart starting to settle down a little.

Not wanting to separate from Miyagi, I kissed her longer than I had the first or second time.

Miyagi was closer to me than anyone else had ever been.

Where our bodies touched, our warmth blended together.

Everything felt unbelievably good.

Wanting to feel more of Miyagi's warmth, I brushed her lips with the tip of my tongue, but unsurprisingly, she shoved me away by my shoulders. I backed up three steps with little resistance, and Miyagi opened her mouth to speak.

「I never said you could kiss me like that.」

「Like what?」

「Like the way you just did.」

「I won't know unless you tell me directly.」

「If you can't figure it out, then don't kiss me at all.」

At times like this, Miyagi tended to be vague with her words. I found this endearing, but my curiosity about how she'd react if I pressed her further often led me to say more than I should, which made her snap back at me.

This happened a lot, and while I didn't want to spoil the mood any further, I couldn't help wanting to see her reactions just a bit more.

「So you're saying it's okay as long as I don't do that again?」

I took two steps closer to her and leaned in, expecting her to get angry at me, but all she did was respond with a displeased tone.

「It's only been about a month since then. You should really

learn how to endure it a bit more.」

She was probably referring to the last day of summer vacation. We hadn't kissed once since that day.

「So, does that mean you've been enduring it too, Miyagi? Are you saying you actually wanted to kiss?」

I knew I was being a little mean, but I was interested in seeing what sort of reaction I'd get.

「Stop twisting my words. Do you think it's funny to say things like that all the time?」

「I do.」

「You're the worst, Sendai-san.」

"I wanted to kiss you."

I knew Miyagi would never say something like that, but a part of me had secretly hoped she would.

It'd be a problem if something like what happened over summer break occurred again.

We can't keep doing this.

Those were the thoughts I used to have, but after kissing Miyagi again, I found it difficult to understand why I felt that way at all. Even the agreement we had started to seem pointless.

「It's fine as long as all we're doing is kissing, right? It's not like it's against our rules anymore.」

「It's not fine.」

Miyagi said firmly.

「In that case, how about we make a rule that says it's okay?」

「No.」

For the price of five-thousand-yen, I had to follow Miyagi's orders.

I initially agreed to it just to pass the time, but it had spiraled into something much more. The rules we established in the beginning were becoming a nuisance, and Miyagi's stubborn commitment to those rules was starting to annoy me.

There was a convenient word for situations like this: flexibility.

As long as no one found out, there was nothing wrong with us interacting at school or even kissing, and as long as no one knew about our relationship, then turning my suggestion into a rule shouldn't be an issue at all.

「Are you that against kissing?」

「That's an unfair way to put it.」

「That means you do want to kiss, so how about you just compromise already?」

「… Even if we keep doing this, it won't matter since you're just going to end up leaving anyway.」

「Let's apply to the same university, then.」

「You should just stay here, Sendai-san.」

「Huh?」

Hearing Miyagi say something I never thought she'd say, I couldn't help but stare at her. Her lips were pressed tightly together.

「Miyagi?」

I called out her name, but she didn't reply.

Instead, she turned her gaze away. I reached out to touch her cheek, hoping to get her to look at me, but she coldly responded with,

「Don't touch me.」

I ignored what she said and rested my palm against her cheek. Normally, Miyagi would've pushed my hand away by now, but today, she didn't.

「Give me my necktie back, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi said, her words reasonable enough to make me pull my hand away from her cheek. With no reason to resist, I did as she asked. I took my necktie off and handed it to her while she did the same.

Before she could say anything else, I wanted to tell her what to do with the other thing we had exchanged.

「You can keep my blouse, Miyagi. It's not like I'll get another chance to wear it anyway. Do you still want yours back?」

I told her I'd brought the blouse with me, though in reality, it wasn't even in my bag. Even if she wanted it back right now, I couldn't give it to her, but I doubted it would be an issue.

「You don't have to give it back today.」

Her words were vague, but Miyagi was entrusting her blouse to me. Then, as if to steer the conversation elsewhere, she asked,

「Why did you ask me to come here today?」

「Because it's been a while since we've seen each other. I just wanted to talk.」

Before the cultural festival began, Miyagi seemed completely uninterested in the event, yet when I saw her today, she looked like she was enjoying herself.

Miyagi seemed to be having fun even without me, and in the end, I couldn't help but think she would've been annoyed if I'd gone to her class. Besides, even if I had visited, we wouldn't be able to talk anyway. On top of that, while I enjoyed last year's festival, this year's just wasn't the same. Even though I spent this year's festival the same way as I did last year, something about it just felt off.

That was why I texted Miyagi.

I just didn't want the cultural festival to end on such a dull note.

That was pretty much it.

「That was your idea of a talk?」

「Things might've gotten a bit out of hand, but we did talk, didn't we?」

Sure, we did other things too, but we definitely talked.

Broadly speaking, it wasn't wrong to say we had talked. Miyagi looked unhappy and began mumbling, "I guess, but…" though she didn't seem interested in voicing the rest of her complaint to me.

「Shall we head home?」

I asked, stating it more like a decision than a question, and Miyagi nodded.

We hadn't been here that long, but quite a bit of time had passed since the cultural festival ended. The sun had been setting earlier lately, so it must've been dark out by now.

「Do you want to leave first?」

I asked out of consideration for Miyagi, who probably didn't want us to be seen together.

「… No, you go first, Sendai-san. I'll follow you to the shoe lockers.」

「You're going to follow me? But someone might see us together. Are you okay with that?」

「I'll keep enough distance so that even if someone sees us, it won't matter. And, well…」

「What is it?」

Somehow, I could guess what she was going to say, but I still

decided to ask her anyway, and she replied in a sulky voice.

「It's scary being in the old school building.」

「Do you need me to hold your hand?」

「I don't need you doing anything unnecessary. Just hurry up and go already. It's getting dark.」

「Getting dark? It's already dark, so how about you walk next to me?」

「No, absolutely not. Now get out into the hallway.」

Miyagi said with a frown on her face as she opened the door and shoved me out.

Left with no other choice, I started walking.

The sound of my footsteps echoed lightly, and soon I heard another set of footsteps following me.

When I turned to look at Miyagi, I felt more at ease than I had during the entire cultural festival.

What I Want to Do With Miyagi and What Miyagi Wants to Do (II)

Part 78

Even though Miyagi had tried to stop me, in the end, I was the one who couldn't hold back.

I didn't need to be thinking clearly to know I'd been acting strange today.

It was absurd of me to call Miyagi out and then force a kiss on her.

But I didn't regret it.

Besides, Miyagi didn't run, so she was just as much at fault. We were no different, and I had no doubt she wanted to kiss me too.

—— Wow, what a ridiculous lie.

All Miyagi did was let me kiss her. I was the one who forced it on her. If I hadn't done that, things wouldn't have spiraled the way they did. I knew I was just fooling myself. I understood that perfectly well. Yet, the fact that I was still thinking about kissing her, even after everything that happened, made me feel like I deserved to sink to the bottom of hell.

I sighed so deeply it felt like I was deflating my brain. Even then, I kept sighing, as if I could empty my lungs completely, and collapsed onto my bed.

A short-sleeved blouse hung from a hanger on the wall of my room—it was Miyagi's. It had been there for so long, it felt like part of the room now.

「I should put that away.」

I stood up and folded the blouse, shoving it into my drawer next to the long-sleeved shirt Miyagi had given me—or more

accurately, forced on me. The things Miyagi had given me were gradually piling up, slowly taking over my room. Even the five-thousand yen bills tucked away in my piggy bank were from her. It felt like, even after graduation, plenty of traces of her would still be left behind.

I could've easily spent the five-thousand-yen bills and thrown the clothes I'd gotten from her away.

I knew those options were open to me, but I just couldn't bring myself to do what anyone else in my shoes would've done.

I couldn't even resist the urge to kiss her. Whenever it came to anything related to Miyagi, even the most trivial tasks felt insurmountable and often ended in disaster.

As yet another heavy sigh escaped me, I heard my phone chime from the desk.

'It's probably just Umina,' I thought, and when I checked, sure enough, her messages lit up the screen. They were cheerful and lively, saying things like, "Today was fun!" and "We should check out other schools' cultural festivals too!" Not in the mood to write a proper response, I quickly replied with, "I agree," then tossed my phone onto the bed and sat down at my desk.

The timing wasn't great, given that the cultural festival had just ended, but midterms were about to come up in less than two weeks. As long as nothing major came up, my grades were good enough for the school I was aiming for; I just needed to maintain them. Still, that didn't mean I could afford to slack off in my studies.

I had no intention of changing my school of choice this late in the process.

But Miyagi's words were bothering me.

"You should just stay here, Sendai-san."

I could tell she was being serious, but it didn't sound like something Miyagi would say. More importantly, those words carried too much weight to be said lightly.

But if I chose to stay here, my relationship with Miyagi might

not have to end after graduation.

Or at least, that was what I wanted to believe, but I doubted it would turn out that way.

The thought of changing my university choice and staying here was something I had never considered, and I couldn't imagine going through with it. There was no point in attending university if it meant being stuck at home. No matter which university I chose, my parents would support me until graduation, so I wanted to attend one far away enough to escape my current life.

Plus, even if I chose to stay here, I couldn't picture a future where Miyagi walked alongside me.

Knowing her, she'd stubbornly cling to the rules and end our relationship the moment we graduated. And even if she didn't enforce it, I could easily see her saying, "No, absolutely not," if I tried to invite her to be by my side, just as she had done earlier today.

I held up my right hand, watching the light shine through it.

I had been half-serious when I asked Miyagi if she wanted to hold hands earlier.

'If you're scared, we can hold hands,' was what I thought, but what I really wanted was to take Miyagi—who had been quietly trailing behind me—by the hand and walk side-by-side with her.

I clenched my fist that I had raised, then let it go.

Just a little over a month ago, I had no desire to hold Miyagi's hand.

I certainly hadn't wanted to on that day we bumped into each other at school.

Sure, there were moments I felt the urge to touch her, but that was the extent of it.

Today, though, felt different; today, I really wanted to hold Miyagi's hand.

Ever since I met Miyagi, each day felt like I was letting go of a bit more of who I used to be. Because of this, I couldn't help but feel disheartened, unsure of what tomorrow might hold.

The hand in front of me was just an ordinary hand, not much different from Miyagi's. It might have been slightly larger due to my height, but otherwise, it was unremarkable. My hand hadn't changed in the past month, yet now it longed to hold Miyagi's. It felt as if, even if it were to detach from my body, it would somehow find its way to her.

If we were to think solely about the act of holding hands, I had no trouble doing so with Umina or Mariko. I could easily hold their hands whenever I wanted and for as long as I liked. I could probably hold hands with other people, too. In fact, I could hold hands with just about anyone, but there was only a limited number of people I wanted to hold hands with.

Whenever I heard the term 'limited,' like in 'limited stock' or 'limited-time offer,' I thought of it as something rare and exciting. But it's a problem that everything in my life is becoming 'limited' to Miyagi; it restricts me too much.

The only time I could accept being restricted by Miyagi was whenever we were together after school.

That aside, considering we'd already kissed and came close to doing even more, it felt strange to suddenly want to hold hands, as if we were doing things backwards.

I lowered my hand and let out another sigh.

Holding hands wasn't necessary—I could live without it.

What I couldn't guarantee was that I wouldn't kiss her again.

「This is all Miyagi's fault.」

Today, I realized that if I told her I wanted to kiss her, Miyagi would let me, even if reluctantly. I was sure if I said it again, she'd allow it again. With that in mind, I couldn't confidently say I wouldn't repeat what happened today. Part of me even started thinking that if things were going to end at graduation anyway, there was no reason to keep forcing myself to hold back.

But I knew that no matter how much she insisted we weren't friends, it didn't mean I could just do whatever I wanted.

I must have lost one of the screws that held my rationality together somewhere in the music preparation room. But more troubling was that I had no intention of returning to look for it or replace it.

「Well, for now, I guess I should start studying for the exams.」

It didn't matter how much time I spent thinking about Miyagi; I'd never figure out what the right relationship with her should be. Right now, it made more sense to focus on studying for the midterms, where every question had a right answer.

I needed something to occupy my mind anyway.

I opened my textbook and notebook on the desk, ignoring the notifications coming in from my phone on the bed as I kept my gaze fixed on the pages before me.

What I Want to Do With Miyagi and What Miyagi Wants to Do (III)

Part 79

A week had passed since the cultural festival ended. I couldn't say if it felt long or short, but it was definitely more than just a moment.

The next time Miyagi called for me was after the festival's excitement had faded, and the school had shifted gears to prepare for midterms. I wasn't sure how I'd have handled it if she'd reached out any sooner, so I was relieved she waited this long.

Maybe Miyagi was hesitant to see me, but the time apart helped me sit next to her now without losing my cool.

We hadn't met at Miyagi's place for some time due to our conflicting schedules, but her room still felt as comfortable as ever.

「Do you think you'll do well on the midterms?」

I asked as I turned the pages in my textbook.

「I don't know.」

「I taught you a lot over summer break, didn't I?」

「Yeah, but that doesn't automatically mean I'll do well on the exams.」

「Well, I'm pretty sure your grades will go up at least.」

We might've done things over the summer that we could never admit to anyone, but more importantly, we spent plenty of time studying. It'd be strange and concerning if her grades didn't improve, yet Miyagi hadn't said anything like, "I feel like my grades will improve," or, "I'm sure I'll do fine on the exams."

「Show me your results once midterms are over.」

I poked Miyagi's arm with my pencil, as if to push her into agreeing.

「Why should I show you anything, Sendai-san?」

「Come on, I tutored you through the summer. Of course I'd want to see how you did.」

「I guess you have a point.」

「I'll show you mine too.」

「I don't need to see them.」

「Fine, I won't show you mine, but I still want to see yours.」

「Why do my grades even matter to you?」

Miyagi brushed me off, but if it didn't matter, I wouldn't have asked in the first place.

Knowing her grades would help me figure out which schools she'd likely get into—and more importantly, if she had a shot at the university I was aiming for. I had no plans of swaying her choices, but I still wanted to see her results.

「Look, I plan on tutoring part-time in university, so I just want to see how my teaching paid off.」

「That sounds like a lie.」

「It's not.」

I'd planned on getting a part-time job once I started university, though I hadn't fully committed to tutoring. It was still an option I was considering, so I wasn't exactly lying.

「Let me see your results.」

I pushed again, and Miyagi answered with a sour tone.

「… I'll let you see them as long as you don't make any comments.」

「Like what?」

「Like if my scores are low, or if I've made any mistakes.」

「I wouldn't do that.」

「Fine, then I'll let you see them.」

Miyagi said, but her expression made it clear she wasn't thrilled about showing me her scores.

The tone of her voice made me doubt that she'd actually go through with it, but for now, I had to take her word for it. If I pushed her into "promising" me, she'd likely back out altogether.

"I won't say anything, I just want to see them," I reassured her one last time before turning back to my textbook. After solving a few problems, I glanced over at Miyagi. She was staring down, but not at her books or any notes.

The faint tapping of her fingers on the table cut through the silence. It wasn't particularly loud, but it was enough to distract me. And judging by her restless tapping, she wasn't really focusing either.

What's going on with her?

Recently—or at least before the cultural festival—Miyagi had been taking her studies seriously. But today, she seemed completely unmotivated.

Midterms were right around the corner, and if she didn't focus soon, it could be a problem.

I was just about to get her attention, her fingers still tapping on the desk, when she called out to me first.

「Sendai-san.」

「What is it?」

The tapping noises stopped, and Miyagi grew quiet.

Even though she called my name, she didn't follow up with anything.

「Miyagi?」

I glanced at her, who had supposedly called my name out for no reason. After a moment, she quietly asked,

「… Sendai-san, when's your birthday?」

「Wait, my birthday? Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?」

Her question felt completely out of the blue.

「No particular reason.」

「When's yours, Miyagi?」

「It's in September. It's already passed. But enough about me; tell me your birthday, Sendai-san.」

I half-expected her to say, "I'm not telling you," or "I'm the one asking," but to my surprise, she answered without a hint of annoyance. If anything, she seemed too busy to complain, so I decided to give her a straightforward answer.

「Hazuki.」

「Isn't that just your name?」

「That's not what I'm getting at. You know how there's Satsuki, Minazuki, Fumizuki…」

As I began to list the months from the Japanese calendar starting from May, it seemed Miyagi finally understood what "Hazuki" meant.

「—So, in August?」

「Yep. My birthday's in August, which is why my name is Hazuki. Pretty simple, right?」

"Hazuki" was the traditional name for August in the Japanese

calendar.

And since I was born in August, I was named “Hazuki.” It might not have been the most creative way to choose a name, but I did like how “Hazuki” sounded.

「So, why did you want to know?」

I asked, still unsure why Miyagi suddenly inquired about my birthday.

She didn’t comment on the connection between my name and my birth month, nor did she ask for the exact day.

What could she possibly want with just my birth month?

Miyagi looked back down after she said ‘August,’ leaving me clueless about her intentions.

「If you’re not going to explain why you asked, then get back to studying.」

Miyagi had a habit of saying things that didn’t always make sense, but she usually had a reason behind them. She must have asked me about my birthday for a purpose, yet her silence left me unable to pry it out of her.

I shifted my focus to my textbook, but then Miyagi suddenly stood up and pulled out a small box from her desk drawer.

「Here, take this.」

She said flatly, placing the box on top of my textbook.

「What is it? What are you giving me?」

I asked, staring at the long, thin box.

「… Obviously, what I want to give you is in that box.」

「Okay, but why are you giving me a present out of the blue?」

「Why does it matter? It’s just something I want you to have,

so take it.」

Honestly, I already had a good idea of what was inside, but I wanted to hear it from her.

「Is this supposed to be a birthday present?」

I doubted Miyagi would give me a straightforward answer, so I decided to answer my own question.

「If that's what you want to think, then sure.」

She really wasn't being honest.

The small box was beautifully wrapped, clearly showing it had been specially prepared. After asking about my birthday, presenting a gift like this made it obvious it was intended as a birthday present. I couldn't understand why Miyagi wouldn't admit it, and I had no idea why she had taken the time to prepare a gift for me in the first place.

It was strange to have a birthday present ready before knowing when my birthday was, and we didn't have the sort of relationship where we'd exchange gifts either.

「What would you do if my birthday hadn't already passed?」

「That doesn't matter. Even if this were a birthday gift, there's no rule that says I have to give it to you on your birthday.」

「You went through all this trouble just to give me a birthday present. There must be a reason behind it, right?」

「Fine, if you don't want it, then just give it back.」

Miyagi said sharply, and before I could respond, she tried to grab the box from my textbook. I quickly caught her hand.

「Wait, what are you going to do with it if I let you take it back?」

「I'll just throw it away.」

「You always act so rashly. There's no reason to throw it away, is there?」

「Well, I don't plan on using it, and I don't have anyone else to give it to.」

I still couldn't figure out the mystery behind this birthday present, which clearly had to have a reason behind it. But I realized I didn't have the luxury of time to puzzle it out. If I hesitated any longer, Miyagi would probably just toss it away.

「Okay, I'll take it, so give it here.」

I reclaimed the small box from Miyagi's grasp.

「Can I open it?」

「There's no point in giving it to you if you don't open it.」

Miyagi snapped back, her tone sharp. Given her irritation, it was clear she wasn't in the best mood.

As I opened the box, I noticed the expression on Miyagi's face was as if someone had forced her to eat 99% dark chocolate. I couldn't remember ever receiving a birthday present from anyone while they looked so bitter. I had a feeling Miyagi would be the first —and last—person to do that.

This feels awkward to open.

I sighed, feeling her gaze bore into me as I slowly peeled away the wrapping and opened the box. Inside was a silver necklace —well, a pendant, to be precise—but either way, it was an accessory.

The charm hanging from the chain had a moon motif, which felt a bit too cute for my taste. It seemed like it would probably suit Miyagi better. As I inspected the chain for any brand markings, I hoped it wasn't anything too expensive, but thankfully, it didn't seem like it was.

Miyagi had already given me five-thousand yen today. Whether this accessory was a birthday gift or not, it felt wrong to accept another thing from her without giving something back.

「Let me give you something in return. Is there anything you want?」

I asked, placing the pendant back into the box.

「I don't want anything.」

「So you wouldn't mind anything I choose, then?」

「I don't want a gift from you.」

Miyagi replied, her tone sharper than I expected.

「That stings a little, you know.」

It was common to offer something in return, like homemade sweets or sharing notes. When you get a birthday gift, it's only courteous to reciprocate. But Miyagi, who adamantly rejected my offer, didn't seem to get that.

Or maybe it was just me she didn't want a gift from. She'd probably accept a return gift from someone else—like Utsunomiya, for instance.

It was probably for the best not to dwell on it, so I shut the box's lid.

「I'm the only one allowed to give gifts here. Now put it on. That's an order.」

Miyagi said, reopening the box I had just closed.

「Sure, but usually, the one who gives the gift puts it on for the recipient.」

「You can put it on yourself.」

「Normally, you'd say, "Let me put it on for you," right?」

「I'm not saying that.」

I figured she'd say something like that, but the way Miyagi put it was incredibly blunt.

I didn’t find this part of her cute at all.

「Is that so?」

While I didn’t mind wearing it, her tone wasn’t exactly endearing. I figured there was no point in mentioning that now; any comment would likely lead to another order from her, which wouldn’t end well.

I pulled the pendant from the box, unclasped it, and slowly put it on.

What I Want to Do With Miyagi and What Miyagi Wants to Do (IV)

Part 80

「Okay, I put it on.」

I said, tracing the pendant with my fingers as I stared at Miyagi.

I didn't mind wearing accessories, but something about having one on while in my school uniform made my chest feel slightly uneasy.

「Yeah, I can see that.」

「That's not what I mean. Don't you have anything to say?」

「Can I touch it?」

「I was asking for your opinion on how it looks.」

Before I had given her permission to touch it, Miyagi was already reaching out, like it was the most natural thing to do. I wasn't expecting her to say something flattering, but I also didn't expect her to try and touch it. I reflexively tried to pull back, but her hand reached me first.

Her fingertips traced the chain's outline.

As they moved, they lightly brushed against my skin, tickling me a little.

「Isn't the chain a bit too long? I would've preferred it a little shorter.」

I caught her unsteady fingers and complained about something that didn't really matter to me.

「If it were any shorter, it'd show at school.」

She tugged the chain slightly, as if to check its length, then let go.

「You want me to wear this at school?」

「Keep it on until we graduate.」

「You're telling me not to take it off, all the way until graduation?」

「Yeah, wear it everywhere, whether you're at home or at school.」

「Is that an order?」

「It is.」

Miyagi's tone wasn't forceful, nor was it particularly soft.

The pendant was just a normal pendant—nothing more. It looked like an ordinary accessory, so it wouldn't be unusual if I decided to wear it everywhere.

But her words made me realize something.

This wasn't just any accessory.

Miyagi wasn't the type to give me something without a reason behind it.

I didn't want to say it out loud because it felt like she'd agree immediately, but this pendant felt like a collar, her way of showing ownership. Otherwise, there was no reason for her to force me to wear it until we graduated.

「Giving me orders that apply at school is against the rules, you know.」

The pendant might have been just an accessory, but the fact it was a gift from Miyagi made it feel like a soft but firm grip around my neck, like I was being stifled.

She'd done similar things before—like leaving hickeys or bite

marks on me—but those would always fade. This pendant, however, wouldn't. Despite weighing almost nothing, the pendant felt unbearably heavy. I wanted to at least take it off while at school.

「Let's just make it a rule that says it's okay to wear it, then. Remember what you said, Sendai-san? Learn to compromise every now and then.」

Miyagi echoed the words I had used in the music preparation room, something I never thought would be turned back against me.

「Compromising, huh… Fine, I'll do it if you say, "Please put it on."」

I knew she'd never agree to that condition.

「Never mind, then. I don't care if you decide to wear it or not.」

「Don't you think you can afford to be a little honest at times like this?」

「No.」

Just as I expected, Miyagi quickly retracted the order she'd given.

Now, I had the freedom to choose when to wear the pendant.

I glanced at Miyagi, who had now fallen silent and was sulking. She tapped her fingertip on the table, then did it again before reaching for the small box that held the pendant.

Miyagi was likely regretting giving me the present.

I knew there was no need for me to compromise—she wasn't even willing to ask me nicely, as if it were a favor, which was why I didn't allow her order to stand.

I knew all of this, but for some reason, my mouth decided to move on its own.

「… Fine, if all you want is for me to keep it on, then I'll leave it on until graduation. But I'm not going to care if a teacher

sees it and confiscates it.」

I said as I took the small box back from Miyagi's hands.

I knew this all too well, as it had happened many times in the past, but I really was soft on Miyagi. Even though her orders went against our rules, I still chose to wear the pendant.

「I don't think anyone will notice as long as you keep your second button fastened.」

Miyagi said quietly, her eyes focused on my blouse.

「I feel like they will.」

「Try buttoning one up, then.」

I had two buttons undone, but I did as she said and fastened one. Now with only one button undone, like I usually wore it at school, I asked,

「Can you see it?」

「No, I can't.」

「I guess this works, then.」

「… Sendai-san, don't let anyone else see it from now on.」

「Huh? That's going to be hard, you know. I mean, I'm going to have to change clothes for gym class and all.」

「Make sure no one else sees it except me.」

Miyagi's order sounded unreasonable.

Hiding it might be doable most of the time, but with classes like gym where we had to change clothes around other people, keeping the pendant completely out of sight was nearly impossible. Plus, the words "except me" stood out. The fact she was making herself an exception led me to a certain realization.

「Wait, does that mean I have to let you see it, Miyagi?」

「You always leave your second button undone here, so I'm going to see it anyway. Also, if I order you to, then you'll have to show it to me.」

「If you can already see it normally, then why go out of your way to order me to show it?」

「I want to be able to see it more closely.」

「… Uh, isn't that order kind of erotic?」

Since she wasn't planning on giving me any orders to take off my uniform or anything, showing Miyagi the pendant technically stayed within the boundaries of our rules.

Still, there was a big difference between, "I can see it when your buttons are undone," and, "I'm ordering you to show it to me," even though the outcome was the same. Having to show her just because she was ordering me to felt pretty immodest.

「There's nothing erotic about it. Let me see it right now.」

The same mouth that had just told me to button up was now telling me to undo it.

「This really does feel erotic, though.」

「It's not nearly as erotic as you usually are, Sendai-san. And besides, you always leave your second button undone anyway, so stop complaining and just unbutton it already.」

「You really want me to undo it again?」

「I can't see it unless you do, right?」

She was right—I always left that button undone. But now, being told to unbutton it just for her to see the pendant felt strangely awkward.

「Fine.」

But acting like it was a big deal would only make it one, so I decided to do as I was told and undid the button.

「Is this good enough?」

Miyagi's gaze seemed to burn into my chest.

I knew she was only looking at the pendant, but I could feel a strange tingling sensation around my collarbone.

「You don't have to stare so intensely, you know.」

「I'm just looking at the gift I gave you. I can stare as much as I want.」

「Did you go to all the trouble of getting me this just so you could do this?」

Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if the pendant wasn't only meant to be a collar—maybe she wanted an excuse to have me unbutton my blouse and look at my chest.

「You don't need to know why I got this gift for you.」

Miyagi said softly, then added,

「Also, undo one more button.」

「You can see it just fine as it is, right?」

「Not well enough.」

「Haven't you been staring at it for a while now?」

「I want a closer look. I'm giving you an order, so you have to obey.」

Normally, there'd be no reason to undo the third button.

But Miyagi didn't seem like she was about to give up easily today.

That was how things worked normally, but exceptions could always be made, and today I chose to make one for her. It didn't seem like she was doing this just to see the pendant anymore, but getting into an argument wasn't worth it either.

「Fine, fine.」

I replied half-heartedly as I took off my necktie and undid the third button. Miyagi reached out, her fingers brushing the fabric lightly. She didn't pull the blouse open too far, only enough to get a better view of the pendant.

She had seen my undergarments and skin countless times already, so there was no need to feel embarrassed. Yet, I couldn't help but feel unsettled, like my heart was floating somewhere above the clouds.

Miyagi's fingers traced the chain again, as if trying to count the links, which felt a little ticklish.

Then, the hand that had been tracing the chain suddenly pressed down on my body. What was once a gentle brush against my skin while touching the pendant became a forceful push, making me lose my balance. I fell to the floor, with Miyagi's body hovering above me.

「Hey, Miyagi, that hurt.」

I didn't fall too hard, but my back and shoulders felt sore from the impact. Without a word, Miyagi leaned closer to my chest and kissed the charm. Since the charm was small, her lips touched my chest as well, but the way she kissed it made it clear she intended to focus only on the little object.

She hadn't put much force into her lips.

Yet, it felt heavy—almost suffocating.

The part where I was being touched felt incredibly warm.

Miyagi appeared entirely unfazed, as if she wasn't even aware of what she was doing to me.

I took a deep breath.

It was getting hard to breathe, so I gently tugged at Miyagi's hair, and she lifted her head.

She stroked the chain with her fingers once more.

As I watched her, I understood that my earlier guess was right. Miyagi had stayed silent before the kiss and continued to be quiet now, but I couldn't shake the feeling that everything she did was her way of asserting her ownership of me. What she had just done seemed to confirm that more than anything else up to this point.

This pendant was likely—no, it was definitely—a symbol that Sendai Hazuki belonged to Miyagi until graduation.

Honestly, I was at a complete loss for words.

I didn't want to admit it to her, but I was accepting this gift. It felt suffocating and burdensome, yet for some reason, it didn't really bother me.

「Isn't this enough already, Miyagi?」

Finding myself at a loss for words, I decided to say something trivial as I tapped her on the back. But Miyagi didn't move away. Instead, she leaned in to kiss the pendant again, her fingertips gliding over the small charm and inevitably brushing against my skin.

Her fingers slipped from the charm, moving lower.

It felt ticklish, but it was also starting to stir up deeper emotions.

Miyagi attempted to unfasten the fourth button herself.

This is bad.

The sensations had gone beyond mere ticklishness, prompting me to grip her hand to stop her.

「Wait, stop, Miyagi. It'll be dangerous if we go any further than this.」

「Are you telling me to stop because I'm doing something against the rules?」

「Well, that too, but I feel like I might lose my mind.」

I couldn't keep treating this like it was no big deal; if we didn't stop now, it could turn into a real problem.

I didn't trust my own judgment, and if I didn't express that to Miyagi, we'd both be in trouble.

「What's happening with you, Sendai-san? Don't let your mind slip away so easily. Tie it down so it stays in place if you have to.」

「That's easier said than done.」

「… Why do you sound so unsure of yourself?」

Miyagi asked with a hint of exasperation.

Even though she asked me, I couldn't make sense of it myself. I had no idea why Miyagi trusted my judgment so much, so I just gave her a half-hearted response.

「I don't know either, so you should be careful, Miyagi.」

I said, shifting the responsibility back onto her shoulders.

Miyagi went quiet, her expression turning contemplative as her brows furrowed.

After about ten seconds of thought, she mumbled,

「What if I told you I'd let you kiss me if you let me undo one more button?」

After all her deliberation, she had come up with a proposal I never would have expected, leaving me momentarily speechless.

I mulled over her words in my mind, then decided to double-check with her.

「— So, you're saying you'd let me kiss you?」

「Yeah.」

I never could've imagined she would offer something like

that.

I had unfastened the fourth button on my blouse in front of her before, so this wasn't something I needed to think twice about.

「Alright, deal. I'll let you unbutton it.」

「You do it yourself, Sendai-san.」

「Okay.」

I did as I was told and unfastened the fourth button on my blouse. Miyagi's fingers brushed against my stomach, causing my body to tense slightly.

Then, she pressed her palm against me. The warmth was gentle yet unsettling, causing me to catch my breath. The heat felt like it was seeping deep inside me, so I grabbed Miyagi by the wrist. But she showed no intention of going further. Her hand glided softly along my side before finally pulling away.

「Okay, you can kiss me now.」

She said quietly.

I raised myself slightly and gently caressed her neck, sliding my hand down the back of her neck as I pulled her closer. It hadn't been that long since our last kiss, but my eagerness made me press my lips against hers with a bit more force than usual.

I bit down on her lips lightly, as if to savor the touch I'd been longing for. Normally, Miyagi would've pushed me away by now, like she was trying to get rid of me as fast as possible, but today she was unusually accepting.

It felt like she'd let me get away with undoing a button on her blouse, so I pulled away from the kiss and loosened Miyagi's necktie.

Miyagi didn't seem to mind. It looked like she was willing to overlook the button I'd undone, so I brought my lips closer to her neck. However, before I could kiss it, she pushed me away by the shoulders with considerable force, sending me straight back down to the floor.

「We're done.」

Miyagi said firmly before standing up.

「Isn't that a bit too quick?」

「Well, in that case, are you willing to offer something more? It's supposed to be a trade, so if I let you kiss me again, then I get to ask for something in return as well.」

「You never said it'd be just one kiss.」

「It doesn't matter if I said it or not. The trade was good for one kiss only.」

「That seems kind of unfair, don't you think?」

「I only touched you a little bit. I think that was worth the equivalent of one kiss.」

Miyagi said in a tone that didn't hide her dissatisfaction as I started to button my blouse back up.

「Okay, fine. We'll stop here.」

I had a feeling that if I kept talking, I'd only provoke her into giving me worse orders. It wasn't like I wanted to push things further; I just wanted to touch her a little more since she seemed okay with it.

I got up slowly. As I reached to close my blouse, Miyagi stepped in and began buttoning it for me, starting at the bottom, working her way up until every last button was done.

「This feels a little tight.」

「Just deal with it.」

「Is that an order?」

「Not really.」

She muttered, clearly irritated, as she walked back to the

table. Feeling like I couldn't breathe properly, I loosened my tie and undid one button.

Chapter 25

Sendai-san is Selfish (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 81

I glanced at the exam papers scattered on my desk.

The results weren't too bad.

In fact, they had improved.

Still, I doubted they were enough to get me into the same university as Sendai-san. I'd agreed to let her, who was supposed to arrive any minute now, see my scores, but she'd probably think the same.

The university she had set her sights on was already far beyond my reach. A bit of extra effort wouldn't bridge the gap, so these scores felt like what I deserved.

There was no reason to feel down about it, and it didn't bother me much. My mood was a bit dampened, though. Probably because of the awful weather outside.

I glanced out the window.

The rain that started earlier in the afternoon was still coming down.

The sky was dark, casting a gloomy air.

Sendai-san had told me she would be running a bit late today, so she hadn't shown up yet.

To pass the time, I picked up my phone and started flipping through a digital pamphlet of some university.

I sighed as I scrolled through the pages.

It wasn't even for the school I wanted to attend, but for Maika's. By now, I had gone through it so many times that I was very familiar with what was written in it.

It wasn't as hard to get into as the university Sendai-san was aiming for, but if it had been just a little while ago, my teachers would've discouraged me from even considering it. Now, though, it was a school I didn't want to give up on without at least trying to apply. Plus, it was really close to the university Sendai-san was trying to get into.

I still had time to apply.

It's not like I had to only apply to local schools.

I kept flipping through the pamphlet, reaching the last page before closing it. Looking at it wasn't going to change anything, but I decided to open the pamphlet for the university Sendai-san was aiming for. I had read it over several times before, and nothing in it was going to be different today, so I skimmed through a few pages before closing it halfway.

I put my phone back on my desk.

I pulled out one of the two erasers sitting in my pencil case—the one Sendai-san had gone out of her way to return to me at school.

The number of memories I had with Sendai-san had grown, and some of them became things I would look back on.

The necklace that wasn't in my hands anymore that I had given her before our midterm exams was another thing that would become a memory.

—— Not that any of this was a good thing.

What happened that day was etched in my mind. It wasn't something I'd ever turn into an anniversary, but it was an event that would stay with me for a long time.

If memories were to be left behind, they should stay with Sendai-san alone.

But if something was significant enough to stay in her memory, it would stick with me too. Whether or not there were physical reminders, traces of Sendai-san were steadily growing within me. Even a single eraser had been imbued with her presence.

I hadn't meant to collect this many memories of her, but somehow, I kept doing things that made it happen. I wished I could get rid of the part of me that wasted time on things like browsing pamphlets for schools I couldn't even hope to attend.

I shouldn't have called Sendai-san over today.

I let out a sigh, knowing it was too late to change that now, just as the intercom rang.

I already knew who it was without needing to check.

I returned the eraser to my pencil case and answered the intercom, unlocking the door. Not long after, Sendai-san entered my room.

「It's really cold today.」

Sendai-san, who was usually more sensitive to heat, said as she sneezed.

「Is it still raining hard?」

「No, it's just a light drizzle now.」

「Your shoulders are wet. Here, hand me your blazer.」

I reached out, and she handed me her damp blazer before unbuttoning the second button of her blouse. I noticed the necklace she was wearing.

I felt the urge to touch the silver accessory, but instead, I took her blazer and hung it on a hanger before heading to the kitchen.

I opened the fridge and glanced at the kettle.

Once I made sure there was hot water, I grabbed a tea bag from the shelf and brewed some black tea. Afterward, I poured

myself some soda from the fridge and went back to my room, where Sendai-san was sitting in her usual spot.

I set the cups down on the table.

「Is this black tea?」

「If you want soda, I can give you soda instead.」

「No, black tea's fine. Thanks.」

Turning my back to Sendai-san, who seemed to be in a good mood, I reached for my exam papers on the desk. I didn't really want to show them to her, but since I'd promised, I placed the papers on the table, along with a five-thousand-yen bill.

「Here.」

Sendai-san, who had been sipping her black tea, put down her cup and thanked me as she put the money away. Then, she picked up my exam papers.

「You're letting me see your results?」

「Weren't you the one who wanted to see them, Sendai-san?」

「Yeah, but I didn't think you'd actually show me.」

「If you're not going to look, then give them back.」

I reached my hand out, but she didn't return my exam results, nor did she say a word.

Sendai-san simply stared at the papers in silence.

「Are you not going to say anything?」

「I thought you were the one who didn't want me to say anything.」

She wasn't wrong, but it was uncomfortable seeing her quietly look over my scores. It'd be frustrating if she picked apart each question, pointing out where I went wrong, but her silence

made me anxious.

「At least say something.」

「I don't know what your old scores were like, but this is a huge improvement, right?」

「Yeah.」

「Does this make you want to put more effort into studying?」

「No. I think I'll have no problems getting into a university, so this is good enough for me.」

I said as I snatched my test results away from Sendai-san.

「Do you want to see mine?」

「I don't care about your scores. More importantly, let me see the necklace.」

I tugged on her uniform as she reached for her bag.

「You know, when an accessory has a charm hanging from it, it's actually called a "pendant."」

「Does that really matter?」

「Not really. I guess it just comes down to personal preference.」

Sendai-san shrugged before glancing over at me.

「Well, go ahead, look all you want.」

Her voice sounded indifferent, but that was fine since she was still following my orders.

I reached out and touched the third button on her blouse, unsure if I was allowed to undo it.

At first, Sendai-san grabbed my arm, but she quickly let go.

Maybe that was her way of saying it was okay to unbutton it.

I wanted a better look at the necklace, so I undid the button. Her chest wasn't too exposed, but I could see her undergarments. There was no way she'd let me touch that, so I focused on the necklace.

「That tickles.」

「Just deal with it.」

We had already returned the neckties we exchanged with each other.

She promised to keep wearing the necklace until graduation.

I gave the chain a gentle tug.

「Miyagi, you're being too rough.」

「You talk too much, Sendai-san. Be a bit quieter.」

「Sure, sure.」

I traced the chain with my fingers.

This necklace was just a way to make our relationship easier to understand.

Lately, Sendai-san had been acting too selfishly.

She asked me to meet her at school and then forced kisses on me.

She kept trying to do things I hadn't ordered her to do.

I didn't mind kissing Sendai-san, but I didn't like that she wanted to do it even though we were at school. Sendai-san was supposed to follow my orders, not make requests just because she wanted something. If there was anything we wanted to do, there needed to be a price for it, and I was the only one allowed to pay it.

By making her wear the necklace I gave her, I needed to make sure she understood that I was the only one allowed to give

orders, and she had no choice but to obey me.

I didn't know how effective a deadline set for graduation would be, but as long as she gave me her time for the next few months, that was enough.

During that time, there was no need for her to listen to Ibaraki-san or anyone else.

The only person Sendai-san needed to focus on was me, and I was the only one allowed to touch her.

「Are you satisfied now?」

As if tired of the silence, Sendai-san poked my forehead while I was still touching the necklace.

「Go ahead and button yourself up.」

「Not interested in any trades today?」

She had asked the same thing last time, when I called her over two days before our midterm exams.

Seeing she wasn't in a rush to button up, I asked,

「Do I sound like I want to make a trade?」

「I thought you might be up for one.」

「I'm not. Now button up.」

I had no idea if Sendai-san was being serious about what she said. It felt like she was about to brush off her words as a joke and pretend it never happened.

Last time she was here, right before our midterms started, she had mentioned feeling like she was going to lose her mind, but that seemed like it was just a joke too. To begin with, there was nothing about me that could possibly make her lose her mind.

Besides, just a little while ago, Sendai-san seemed very much in control of herself.

She had always seemed like she wanted to kiss me, but she'd never been this insistent before.

「Miyagi, let's make another trade today.」

「No.」

I refused, fully aware of what she was after.

I didn't mind being kissed, but I was starting to hate that I felt that way at all. Kissing was fine as long as I was the one giving the orders, but I didn't want to do it because I knew she'd probably say something like, "You want to kiss me so badly that you're ordering me to."

Plus——

If we kissed too much, I felt like she'd eventually grow tired of it.

I fastened the third button on Sendai-san's blouse for her and gave her an order that was different from what she wanted.

「Read me a book.」

「What happened to studying?」

「I'll study after you finish reading to me.」

Without offering her usual responses like, "Got it," or, "Sure, sure," Sendai-san silently stood up and moved toward the bookshelf.

「What do you want me to read you?」

「Pick something that you like, Sendai-san.」

「Something that I like, huh.」

She muttered before letting out a quiet sneeze.

「Are you coming down with a cold?」

「Just rumors about me going around, I guess.」

Sendai-san replied indifferently as she came back with a manga volume in hand.

Sendai-san is Selfish (II)

Part 82

My usual message was met with an unexpected refusal.

Because of that, I found myself retracing the directions to Sendai-san's house in my memory.

『I caught a cold and took the day off from school, so I can't make it today.』

We were in different classes, so I wouldn't have known this on my own. I replied with, "Got it," but my thoughts drifted back to how she'd been sneezing when we last saw each other.

If those sneezes on that rainy day were a sign of her catching something, she might have been out of school for a few days by now. I didn't really care how long she was absent, but since she'd never missed school before, I started to wonder if she was okay.

Besides, being stuck in bed at home seemed rough for her, especially given the tension with her family. I wasn't sure what was worse—being in a difficult household like that or being left at home alone—but neither option seemed very pleasant.

I knew visiting her wouldn't actually change anything, but I could at least bring her some food and something to drink. Whether those would be of any use, I wasn't sure, but it was better than nothing at all.

I'd known Sendai-san for more than a year now, so going to check on her wasn't out of place. Besides, I was a human with a heart, too—caring about someone wasn't anything unusual. There wasn't anything weird about this.

Recalling the path we'd once walked together, I headed toward her house.

I could clearly remember the words we'd exchanged, but the route itself was blurry. I hadn't been to her house even once since

then, so it made sense.

Still, I was pretty sure I knew where to go.

On the way to Sendai-san's house, I stopped by a convenience store.

I couldn't remember it clearly, but this was probably the same as the one we stopped by last time.

I grabbed a plastic bottle of tea and some yogurt, tossing them into a shopping basket.

Maybe I should get her some forehead patches, too.

After a moment of hesitation, I added a pack of cooling patches for her forehead. Given the way things were between her and her mother, it seemed like a good idea.

Once I paid for everything, I left the convenience store.

Since I hadn't told her I was coming, there was a chance I wouldn't get to see her even if I visited. But I kept walking, and after about five minutes, I arrived at a familiar house.

Standing at her front door, a sudden pang of regret hit me.

I couldn't exactly text someone that was sick and ask them to come outside, so the only way to enter was to ring the intercom.

Considering the time, her father was likely at work, and maybe her mother as well. But chances were her mother, who I didn't have a very good impression of, would be the one to answer the door. The odds of Sendai-san coming herself were pretty slim.

Maybe I should just leave.

I stared at the shopping bag while standing there. Taking a deep breath in, I exhaled.

I decided to ring the doorbell once, and if no one came, I would go home.

I placed my index finger on the button and pressed it.

The doorbell rang for a moment, then silence followed.

Nobody answered.

Her parents were probably at work, and Sendai-san was likely home alone.

I guess I'll head back, then.

Just as I turned my back to the front door, a woman's voice came through the intercom—one that didn't belong to Sendai-san. It was the first time I'd heard this voice, but I was certain it was her mother.

Hearing it made me want to turn around and leave immediately. But as a high schooler, I couldn't just ring a doorbell and run away. Stumbling over my words, I told her I was here to check up on Sendai-san. Her mother, whom I had only seen once during summer break, opened the front door. In an emotionless voice, she told me to come inside. I thanked her and headed up towards Sendai-san's room.

I climbed the stairs and stopped in front of one of two doors that stood side by side.

I raised my hand to knock but hesitated.

Coming here was quickly becoming my biggest regret of the year.

For some reason, I found myself standing at her door without even letting her know I was coming. Sendai-san might get upset that I showed up without permission, and she might not even let me into her room.

I shouldn't have pressed the button on the intercom. Thinking it would be best to leave the convenience store bag behind, I hooked it onto her doorknob. But because I was so nervous, the plastic bottle inside hit the door with a loud thud. The noise startled me, and before I could figure out what to do, the door opened.

「… Huh? What are you doing here, Miyagi?」

Sendai-san stepped out of her room, dressed in her pajamas, even though I hadn't called her to come out.

「I was just about to leave.」

I turned my back to her as I spoke.

「Wait, what's going on?」

「It's nothing. Don't worry about it.」

I answered without turning around. I started heading down the stairs, but Sendai-san grabbed the hem of my uniform, tugging at me weakly. Likely due to her cold, her grip wasn't strong, but I felt bad pulling away from someone who was sick, so I stopped.

「Even if you tell me not to worry, it's too strange to ignore. There's no way you'd come all the way to my house if it was nothing, right? Also, wait, what's this? Were you the one who brought this, Miyagi?」

Sendai-san asked, pointing at the shopping bag hanging from the doorknob.

「That's for you, Sendai-san.」

「… Thanks. But if you were the one who brought this bag, does that mean you came all the way here just to check up on me?」

「No, not exactly…」

「So, you came to see me anyway? Even though that's not the reason?」

That was why I came, but I didn't want to say it, so I stayed quiet. The hallway fell silent, and after a moment, Sendai-san let out a tired sigh.

「Well, just come in for now.」

While still gripping my uniform, Sendai-san took the shopping bag off the door handle. I had no choice but to accept her invitation, so with my uniform held hostage, I dragged my reluctant

feet into her room.

When I looked around, I saw a bookshelf, bed, and a desk. It was as tidy as before. Her room hadn't changed much since I'd last been here during summer break, but there was a piggy bank on the dresser that hadn't been there before. It looked like the kind meant to store hundreds of thousands of yen in five-hundred yen coins.

When I glanced at Sendai-san, I saw she wasn't wearing any makeup today. Her hair was down without its usual braid.

But she was still wearing the necklace.

And though I didn't know if she had any at home, she didn't seem to be using any cooling patches for her forehead.

「You can sit over there, Miyagi. I'll bring you something to drink.」

「There's food and something to drink in the bag I brought.」

I told her as she placed the convenience store bag beside her bed and checked inside.

「Still, let me bring something for you to have.」

I tried to stop her before she left the room.

「I don't need anything. You should rest since you're sick. I'll leave soon.」

「You're going to leave soon?」

「I can go right now if you want.」

Perhaps worried that I'd leave while she was out of the room, Sendai-san sat down on her bed.

「I've already slept too much, so I don't think I can sleep anymore. How about you keep me entertained with some conversation?」

「There's nothing for us to talk about.」

「We don't have to talk, then. Just stay with me a little longer.」

She mumbled quietly.

Her voice sounded the same, but seeing her in pajamas and without makeup made it clear she was sick, and I'd feel bad leaving her like this.

「How's your temperature?」

「I'm still a bit feverish.」

「You should cool your head down. I brought something you can use in that bag.」

I said, pointing at the shopping bag with the cooling patches while sitting a bit away from her bed.

「Put it on for me, Miyagi.」

「Just do it yourself. You might be sick, but you can handle that much, can't you?」

「Aren't you a little too cold to someone who's sick?」

「You still have a fever, so me being cold is perfect for you, don't you think?」

Even though I hadn't clearly said I came to check on her, that's exactly what I was doing. But I didn't see why I should go out of my way to be nice about it.

「You could at least listen to me for today, can't you?」

Sendai-san said as she tossed the box of cooling patches at me.

Sendai-san is Selfish (III)

Part 83

「You put it on for me. Since I'm sick and all.」

Sendai-san said, as if she was entitled to it.

Usually, I would've tossed the box of cooling patches back at her and forced her to handle it herself. I wanted to do the same today, but it was just as she said—she was sick. That made it harder for me to act as I normally would.

This was throwing me off.

I wished she could sound a little more energetic. Her voice was hoarse, making it clear she wasn't well. Plus, since I was the one who asked about her temperature, being cold toward her didn't feel right.

I picked up the box and got closer to the bed.

「You can sit here if you want.」

Sendai-san said, patting the spot beside her on the edge of the bed.

I wasn't worried about catching her cold, but I couldn't help but recall the last time I sat here during summer break. That day, she'd licked my feet without me ordering her to. I knew that wouldn't happen again, but it was enough to make me hesitate.

「Miyagi, come sit down.」

As I thought about what to do, her tone shifted from gentle to more demanding.

I could apply the cooling patch without sitting at all, but something told me she'd get angry if I didn't follow her request. It seemed like she was trying to make the most of her illness today.

Left with no other choice, I sat a little away from her and opened the box.

「Okay, I'll put it on right now, so turn and face me.」

When I showed her the cooling patch I had taken from the box, she obediently turned to face me. Yet, she didn't expose her forehead. As I reached out to brush her bangs aside, she grabbed my hand.

It was hot.

The warmth of her hand was enough to remind me that she had a fever, and I flinched. She tugged on my hand firmly, causing the cooling patch to fall onto the bed.

The space between us shrank until our lips met.

Just like the warmth of her hand, her lips felt hotter than usual. Without hesitation, she slipped the tip of her tongue into my mouth.

It felt slick, but more than anything, it burned with heat, leaving me no choice but to accept it. Her warm tongue explored my mouth, almost as though it was trying to entwine itself around mine.

Sendai-san's temperature was so high, I couldn't muster the strength to bite her, push her away, or even complain. The heat of her hand, her lips, and her soft tongue left me unable to escape.

I wanted to pull away.

But I couldn't say I hated it.

The heat left me unable to think clearly anymore.

I had no intention of moving my tongue in response, but I didn't feel the need to push her away either. The feeling of our lips pressed together was so good that I lost track of how long we'd been kissing.

With my sense of time slipping away, my mind became filled with nothing but Sendai-san.

I couldn't breathe properly, and it was starting to feel suffocating.

When I pulled my hand free to grip her pajamas, she slowly began to pull away from the kiss. Just as I was instinctively about to pull her closer by the pajamas, I couldn't help but complain, as if to cover up my feelings.

「… That wasn't supposed to be an invitation for a kiss.」

「But you're the one who came closer, Miyagi.」

「I didn't even try to move closer to you. Look, you made me drop the cooling patch. Don't do anything like that again. That kiss felt gross.」

I felt so foolish for going along with her just because she was sick.

If I treated her more kindly, things like this would probably happen all the time.

I didn't hate it enough to make a big deal out of it, but I didn't want her to kiss me again.

「Can't you say things a little more nicely? That hurt.」

「No, and if you're bothered by what I said, then don't pull something like that again.」

「… Are you mad at me?」

I didn't think I sounded that upset, but today there was a hint of nervousness in her voice, even though I usually spoke to her like I was in a bad mood.

Maybe the fever was making her more sensitive than usual.

This was seriously throwing me off.

Hearing her ask that made me feel like I'd done something wrong.

I said the kiss was gross, but that wasn't really true. I was already used to her kissing me like that. Still, I probably went too far talking to her this way when she was sick. While I wasn't going to take back my words, I decided to answer her honestly.

「I'm not mad, but I'm not exactly in a good mood either.」

「Then let me offer you something in return. Give me an order.」

「What are you even saying? I'm not doing that.」

「Why not?」

「Do I seem like the type of person who'd order a sick person around?」

I did want to give her an order, but I wasn't heartless enough to make someone who was sick follow it. Compared to Sendai-san, who seemed like she was trying to make the most out of her being sick today, I was a relatively normal human being, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to just listen to her a little today.

「I wouldn't mind if you were that kind of person, though.」

「Stop saying weird things and go to sleep already.」

I gave Sendai-san a gentle push on the shoulders, but instead of lying down, she coughed.

「See? Your cold's getting worse. Now, go to sleep.」

「I don't want to.」

Sendai-san said, coughing again.

「If your cold's so bad that you're coughing this much, you shouldn't be trying to kiss me. If I get sick, it's going to be on you, Sendai-san.」

「I kissed you because I want you to catch my cold, so I hope you do get sick.」

She tugged on my uniform sleeve as she said something

outrageous.

「That's awful. I hate getting sick and being stuck at home alone with nothing to do but sleep.」

Usually, I didn't understand what went through her mind, but today, with her fever, she was even more incomprehensible. Normal people wouldn't go around saying they wanted to infect others with their illness, and she'd never said anything this ridiculous before.

「I'll take care of you, don't worry.」

「You don't need to do that.」

「Oh, what if I stayed over at your place to take care of you?」

「Absolutely not. Who knows what you'd do if I let you. Now go to sleep already.」

It didn't seem like she had any intention of listening to me today.

I didn't like how insistent she was about taking care of me, and I definitely didn't want her staying over. While I doubted she'd actually go through with it, it was best to brush it off before a joke like that spiraled into something worse.

「Miyagi, you're just going to leave once I fall asleep, aren't you?」

Sendai-san asked, her voice unusually sulky.

I swallowed the sigh that almost escaped me.

I couldn't be too harsh today. Who knew taking care of sick people could be such a hassle?

「I think I'm being plenty nice by staying until you fall asleep.」

「You could be a little nicer to someone who's sick, though.」

「You want me to be even nicer than I've already been?」

「Yeah.」

「Then stop doing things that are unnecessary.」

「It's not like you'd be nicer even if I didn't, right?」

That stung a bit.

I thought I'd been more than kind to Sendai-san, even though she'd done something I didn't want her to do. But telling her that wouldn't change anything, so I picked up the cooling patch I dropped earlier, grabbed the yogurt I'd bought, and handed it to her.

「Here. Just be quiet and eat this.」

「… Thanks.」

She took the yogurt, peeled the lid off, and took a few bites.

「Stay with me a little longer, Miyagi. I'll get better faster if you're here.」

「I'm not some kind of medicine, you know.」

「I know.」

「Then stop being ridiculous and go to sleep when you're done eating.」

「I told you, I slept too much today.」

「Sleep more anyway.」

「I will if you give me a kiss, Miyagi.」

She paused, her hand still holding the yogurt.

Leaving the spoon in the container, she gently brushed my lips with her fingertip.

Sendai-san's body temperature hadn't changed.

It was still as hot as before.

But the warmth from her fingertip felt comforting. Craving more of her touch, I grabbed the finger that rested on my lips and leaned closer to her. A small sigh escaped me.

「Stop getting carried away, Sendai-san. You don't have to sleep, but at least lie down.」

I took the yogurt from her hands and set it on the table.

She asked for a kiss like it was the most natural thing, and it made me forget for a second that wasn't the reason why I was here.

I pulled out another cooling patch from the box and placed it on her forehead as she frowned slightly.

「So cold.」

「It'd be a problem if it wasn't.」

「Well, yeah, of course.」

「Anyway, if you're not going to sleep, I'm heading home.」

I spoke in a tone not quite as chilly as the cooling patch, and Sendai-san thought for a second before saying, "In that case…"

Something about her pause made me uneasy.

Still, I asked, "What now?"

Quietly, she replied,

「I'll sleep if you give me your hand.」

「My hand?」

「Yeah.」

「Fine. I can do that.」

This request was a lot easier to handle than a kiss, so I agreed

to it. Satisfied with my answer, Sendai-san laid down and held out her hand, urging me to give her mine. I placed my hand on top of hers.

「Is holding hands really that enjoyable for you?」

I asked as I held her warm hand, and she squeezed back.

「It sure is.」

Sendai-san answered as she slowly closed her eyes.

Volume 3 Interlude

My Room, With Miyagi In It

(Sendai PoV)
Part 83-extra

I had expected Miyagi to be gone by the time I woke up.

Still, for some reason, I felt surprised when I saw she wasn't there anymore.

It didn't make me sad to wake from my light sleep to an empty room, nor did I wish I could rewind to the moment before I closed my eyes, but I couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed.

I slowly sat up and glanced over at the table.

There was a half-eaten cup of yogurt there—proof that Miyagi had been in my room earlier.

I felt like she could've at least woken me up to say goodbye before leaving. Or, if she didn't want to do that, even leaving a note would've been enough.

Miyagi couldn't even manage something that simple. She wasn't the type to check in on me when I was sick, yet she had done so like any normal person. So, like any normal person, she should've told me when she was leaving, but she didn't. Miyagi was always behaving in these strange, unpredictable ways.

I peeled the cooling patch from my forehead and held it tightly in my hand.

It wasn't cold anymore.

Just like how Miyagi had been slightly warmer than usual today.

I crawled back under the sheets, coughing softly.

The patch in my hand made me think back, and as I closed my eyes, my thoughts wandered to the disappointment I had felt over missing school before Miyagi came.

◇◇◇

I wish I could go back to school already.

If I'd been able to go today, I wouldn't have had to reply to Miyagi's message with,

『I caught a cold and took the day off from school, so I can't make it today.』

It was sinking in now—I wouldn't be able to go over to Miyagi's place.

The truth hit harder as I lay in bed, stuck at home with my mom.

It felt suffocating, like I might stop breathing at any moment.

My mom never came into my room unless she needed something. Even now, with a cold, that didn't change. She did the bare minimum for me and then stayed away.

It wasn't like I wanted her to be kind or ask if I was alright, but the indifference in her eyes made me compare myself to my older sister.

Whenever my sister got sick, my parents were more□□

Old, buried thoughts started to creep back in.

I really wished I hadn't gotten sick.

It felt worse now that my fever was going down.

When I was really sick, at least I couldn't think straight. My mind was too foggy for those depressing thoughts to take over. But after the medicine lowered my fever from 38 degrees to 37, my ability to think returned.

It would've been nice if my head was filled with positive thoughts, but instead, the negativity crept in, dragging me down into a dark place. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't stop myself from sinking into that bottomless swamp.

It was always easier to fall than it was to get back up, so whenever I thought about my sister, I couldn't help but compare us, which only served to drag my mood down. These pointless thoughts in my head were now spiraling out of control, leaving me feeling more depressed.

As I lay under the covers, I touched the pendant Miyagi had given me.

My fingertip traced the chain over my pajamas, feeling the moon-shaped charm.

In moments like this, I should just think about Miyagi.

Whenever I was in her room, I could forget about my family.

I wonder if I'll be able to go back to school tomorrow?

I pressed my hand to my forehead. It still felt warm, so I reached for my thermometer.

When I checked my temperature, I found it was slightly higher than before.

Nothing good ever came from being caught in the rain.

Before the start of summer break, Miyagi had wanted me to take off my uniform when it got soaked.

That incident was probably what sparked the wicked feelings I had for her.

After catching a cold, I was stuck taking a few days off from school. Now, I was lying in bed, lost in pointless thoughts and using them as an excuse to think about Miyagi.

This wasn't doing me any good.

I rolled over in bed, shutting my eyes tight.

I didn't feel like sleeping, and even if I tried, I wouldn't be able to.

I didn't have the energy to pick up a book or study, and I couldn't be bothered to answer the texts I'd gotten from Umina and the others either.

Time felt like it was dragging on forever, and tomorrow seemed impossibly far away. The house was so quiet, it was hard to tell if anyone else was even home, though I wouldn't have been surprised if my family had gone out without me.

I stretched and curled up again, the rustling of my pajamas and sheets reminding me that time was, in fact, still moving.

I wanted to hear more sounds, so I strained my ears. That's when I noticed the faint sound of someone walking up the stairs.

□□ Is that Mom?

I tensed up.

There was no reason for her to come up at this hour, but no one else would be walking upstairs.

'What a pain,' I thought.

The footsteps faded, and someone stood outside my door, but there was no knock, no opening of the door.

I listened carefully, my breathing distracting me, so I held it in. Suddenly, a loud thud hit the door. It wasn't a sound I'd expect from anyone in my family. I sat up quickly.

What was that?

I waited, but nothing followed.

After that strange thud, there was only silence, leaving me uneasy.

It couldn't have been my mom. She wouldn't knock like that.

So, who was it?

I quietly got out of bed and opened the door.

「… Huh? What are you doing here, Miyagi?」

What was she even doing here?

Miyagi never came to my house. She wasn't the type to drop by uninvited, and I hadn't asked her to come, either.

「I was just about to leave.」

Miyagi said bluntly before turning her back towards me.

「Wait, what's going on?」

「It's nothing. Don't worry about it.」

She took one step, then two, then three. Without looking back at me, Miyagi started walking away. I instinctively stepped into the hallway and grabbed the hem of her uniform.

There was no way she was here for "nothing." Seeing her in my house, someone who rarely ever came over, felt like a big deal. It must've been the same for her too. This was only the second time she'd ever come by, and since we weren't even friends, it couldn't have been for "nothing." She knew that as well, which was probably why she was in such a hurry to leave.

「Even if you tell me not to worry, it's too strange to ignore. There's no way you'd come all the way to my house if it was nothing, right?」

Seriously, what was going on?

Unable to comprehend what was happening, I looked around and noticed there was something that hadn't been there before.

「Wait, what is this? Were you the one who brought this, Miyagi?」

I asked as I pointed at a white shopping bag – probably from the convenience store or the supermarket – hanging from the

doorknob.

「That's for you, Sendai-san.」

「… Thanks. But if you were the one who brought this bag, does that mean you came all the way here just to check up on me?」

「No, not exactly… 」

「So, you came to see me anyway? Even though that's not the reason?」

Given the situation, it seemed obvious that she was here to check on me, but she wouldn't admit it. Instead, she stood silently in the hallway.

「Well, just come in for now.」

My mom rarely came upstairs, but it would be annoying if she saw us standing there. I took the white bag off the doorknob and headed back into my room, pulling Miyagi by her uniform along with me. She followed and closed the door behind us, and I let go of her uniform.

Back in my space, I felt more at ease, knowing the outside world—my mom—was on the other side of the door. But then I started to feel self-conscious. I was still in my pajamas, with no makeup on, and my hair was probably a mess. It wasn't exactly how I wanted to be seen. On top of that, my voice sounded hoarse, much worse than I wanted it to be.

I placed the bag down beside my bed.

Miyagi was so dumb for coming to visit me without even letting me know. I hadn't even had time to change, and now she was inside my room. I wanted to put on something else, but Miyagi didn't seem to care about how I looked as she curiously glanced around my room like it was her first time here.

Then, I suddenly realized□□

I almost gasped.

My piggy bank, where I kept all those five-thousand-yen bills, was out in the open. Of course, Miyagi didn't know what was inside, but just having it there felt like I'd left myself exposed, so I started talking as if to hide it.

「You can sit over there, Miyagi. I'll bring you something to drink.」

「There's food and something to drink in the bag I brought.」

I opened the bag after hearing her mention it, and sure enough, there was food and a drink inside. There were even cooling patches for my forehead. I was surprised Miyagi had thought to buy something like this. In situations like this, I would've expected her to say, "I didn't know what to get," and fill the bag with completely useless stuff.

Never did I think Miyagi could be this considerate.

However, there was only one plastic bottle in the bag.

「Still, let me bring something for you to have.」

「I don't need anything. You should rest since you're sick. I'll leave soon.」

「You're going to leave soon?」

「I can go right now if you want.」

Nothing about this was surprising. We didn't have the kind of relationship where we'd check up on each other when someone missed school, and if she stayed longer, she might catch my cold. Considering what has happened between us and what might happen between us, it was probably best to let her go.

But she'd shown up when I was bored out of my mind.

If I let her leave, time in this room would slow down again.

I sat on my bed and looked over at Miyagi.

「I've already slept too much, so I don't think I can sleep anymore. How about you keep me entertained with some

conversation? 」

「 There's nothing for us to talk about. 」

「 We don't have to talk, then. Just stay with me a little longer. 」

「 How's your temperature? 」

Miyagi asked quietly.

「 I'm still a bit feverish. 」

「 You should cool your head down. I brought something you can use in that bag. 」

She pointed at the bag by my bed.

I knew she wanted me to put the cooling patch on myself. But if she'd gone through the trouble to buy it for me, why not take responsibility for it?

「 Put it on for me, Miyagi. 」

Just yesterday, there'd been a box of cooling patches sitting outside my door.

When I was a kid, my mom used to apply them for me, but now she just left them in the hallway, and I never used them. The box disappeared a few hours later, and none were outside my door today.

But the one Miyagi brought had made it into my room.

「 Just do it yourself. You might be sick, but you can handle that much, can't you? 」

Her cold tone stung.

Miyagi was always like this, but it didn't make it easier to hear.

She could at least take responsibility for the patches she brought into my room.

「Aren't you a little too cold to someone who's sick?」

「You still have a fever, so me being cold is perfect for you, don't you think?」

Her voice didn't soften.

Even with a sick person in front of her, Miyagi was acting as indifferent as ever.

She was so distant, it made me question why she even came to check on me.

「You could at least listen to me for today, can't you?」

I pulled the box of cooling patches from the bag and tossed it at Miyagi, who was still standing.

We weren't in Miyagi's room now.

This was my room, and a five-thousand-yen bill held no weight here.

Miyagi couldn't give me orders, but I could make requests.

Of course, there was no guarantee she'd agree to them.

「You could've hurt me with that.」

Miyagi frowned as she looked at the box that had fallen by her feet.

I probably looked the same way yesterday when I found that box outside my door.

「You put it on for me. Since I'm sick and all.」

Miyagi didn't budge.

She kept staring at the box on the floor, her expression unreadable.

My fever made the silence unbearable. Maybe it was because

I kept insisting on her putting the patch on me, like a child, that the room felt awkward now. It had been a bad idea to ask. I didn't usually rely on Miyagi like this. I should've just stuck the patch on, let the fever cool, and return to my usual self.

Never mind, I'll just do it myself.

I wanted to say that, but before I could, Miyagi bent down, picked up the box, and came towards me, and that part of me that wanted to lean on her resurfaced.

「You can sit here if you want.」

I patted the spot next to me, but she didn't sit. She stood there, her brows furrowed.

「Miyagi, come sit down.」

I said it a bit more firmly this time, and, with a reluctant look, she sat down next to me and opened the box of cooling patches.

「Okay, I'll put it on right now, so turn and face me.」

She said softly, pulling a patch from the box. I did as she asked and turned to face her. Our eyes met, and suddenly, it didn't feel like I was in my uncomfortable house with my mom anymore. It was like I was back with Miyagi, during our usual after-school hours.

It was different from when she came here in the summer. Maybe it was because I'd been trapped in this stuffy house for three days, but now, with her here, my room felt like a comfortable space.

Miyagi reached out her hand.

Just as her fingers moved to brush aside my bangs, I caught her hand.

The cooling patch fell on the bed, and I pulled her towards me.

I knew she was just trying to move my hair and place the patch on my forehead.

But I wanted to kiss her.

I wanted to be closer to her, to make my room feel even more comfortable. So I pressed my lips against hers.

Her lips weren't warm, but they weren't cold either.

It didn't matter, though—it felt good.

I parted her lips with my tongue, slipping inside.

Miyagi didn't resist.

She quietly accepted my kiss.

I was worried she might catch my cold, but I didn't want to stop.

Our tongues intertwined, and I let her warmth sink deep into me, making her presence feel even more tangible. Kissing her made the loneliness of the past few days melt away, and I wanted to kiss her even more.

I pressed my lips harder against hers.

As the kiss deepened, she clutched my pajamas, and we slowly pulled apart.

「… That wasn't an invitation for a kiss.」

Miyagi said, clearly annoyed.

「But you're the one who came closer, Miyagi.」

「I didn't move closer to you. Look, you made me drop the cooling patch. Don't do anything like that again. That kiss felt gross.」

She had sounded so much warmer before the kiss, but now her voice was cold again.

「Couldn't you be nicer about it? That hurt.」

The fever was making me act strange. With my mom just beyond the door, I was already tense, and now Miyagi's words cut deep.

「No, and if you're bothered by what I said, then don't pull something like that again.」

The cooling patches I hadn't used yesterday.

The way things had changed from when I was a child.

Miyagi, who had come to my room, where I wouldn't even invite friends over.

On a day like today, where the past and present collided, I didn't want Miyagi, who gave me a place to feel comfortable during our after-school hours, to be so cold.

Ever since my family stopped caring about me, I spent my time here pretending I didn't care about anything, but today, I couldn't ignore it.

For some reason, memories of the past wouldn't leave me alone. Things I usually brushed off felt overwhelming.

That's why I wished Miyagi had been a little kinder today.

At least while we were here, in my room.

Chapter 26

The Things Miyagi Won't Tell Me (I)

(Sendai PoV)

Part 84

Miyagi had come to check on me the other day.

Her visit was like a bolt from the blue, but nothing more. No storm or disaster followed, and I continued going to Miyagi's place whenever she called me over.

Not much had changed since before I got the cold.

It was already November, and Miyagi was still by my side.

Within those days, a few unexpected things had happened.

Even though our midterms were behind us, Miyagi kept studying diligently.

The last time she showed me her exam results, they weren't quite good enough to aim for the same university as me, but they weren't bad either. She'd have no trouble getting into the school she said she wanted to attend.

But, for someone who once said she wouldn't put in extra effort, she sure was studying a lot.

It wasn't strange for a student in their entrance exam year to study hard, but Miyagi always avoided unnecessary work. It felt strange seeing her study harder than she needed to.

I munched on some chips I'd bought from the convenience store.

"Did you change your first-choice university?"

I had asked her earlier, but she coldly replied with, "No."

I grabbed another chip from the bag on the table.

「Here, Miyagi. Open wide.」

Though I didn't know why she was studying so much, I held a chip out to Miyagi as she focused seriously on her textbook.

「Eat it yourself.」

She had said the same thing back when I last brought chips to her room. As if reenacting that scene, I took another chip and popped it into my mouth.

「Here, have this one.」

「I'm okay.」

Miyagi replied, her expression clearly irritated.

If I tried to shove the chip into her mouth, she'd definitely get angry at me.

She was being colder to me now that I wasn't sick anymore.

I bet she'd be a little nicer to me if I had a cold or fever today, too. I was well aware of how selfish I'd acted when Miyagi came by to check on me the other day, but she never got mad at me for it.

It was nice to know that Miyagi, of all people, could be kind to me, even if it was just because I was sick. Now, I found myself wishing for that same kindness even when I wasn't sick.

「Come on, I'll even feed it to you, so open your mouth.」

I held the chip to her lips, but she kept her mouth shut.

Miyagi was like a stray cat, never doing what I wanted and always running away when I got too close. If I stuck my hand out, she'd bite it. That part of her hurt sometimes.

And yet, even Miyagi, unpredictable as she was, went out of her way to do something for me while I was sick. Seeing that gave

me high hopes.

「Miyagi.」

When I kept pressing the chip to her mouth, she finally opened it, wearing a sour expression on her face.

It was rare for her to give in like this, so I pushed the chip into her mouth, and she grimaced like I'd just fed her something awful.

Still, it felt like buying these chips had been worth the trouble. I would've liked it if she enjoyed the taste more, but the fact that she ate it at all eased my disappointment.

I wasn't trying to feed her like a wild animal, but I wanted to keep giving her things. I hoped that maybe, just maybe, if I kept giving her these chips, it might make her want to find me for treats even after we graduated.

I picked up another chip and held it near Miyagi's lips.

「Here.」

Miyagi didn't say anything, but her glare clearly asked, "Are we seriously still doing this?" Honestly, it wouldn't have surprised me if her frustration was plastered all over the walls too.

Even so, she still reluctantly opened her mouth, frowning the whole time.

When I brought the chip closer, it quickly vanished with a satisfying crunch.

I lightly brushed my fingers against her lips, and she furrowed her brow in annoyance.

She didn't seem to appreciate it, but I ran my fingertip along her lips anyway. In response, Miyagi bit down on my finger just like she had with the chip earlier.

I had expected this from her, but it still hurt.

Lately, whenever I traced her lips like this, she would bite

me. I had even gone out of my way to buy a bag of chips today just so I could do it.

The reason why I did it was simple: we hadn't kissed since the time I was sick. But every time I tried to do something that could lead to a kiss, Miyagi would refuse, just like she did now.

「Miyagi, that hurts.」

My attempt to get her to stop didn't seem to register with her, and instead, she bit down even harder.

「Well, if you're going to keep doing that, you might as well lick it too.」

I said as I brushed the tip of her tongue with the finger she'd been biting, causing her to let it go.

「So you're not going to lick it?」

「No.」

Miyagi looked down at her notebook, finishing up the half-solved problem before flipping the page of her textbook.

She never licked my finger on her own, and if I asked her to lick it, she'd immediately stop biting it.

I was beginning to understand her reactions, but I still had no idea why she was so against kissing.

It wasn't like I had to kiss Miyagi, but it wasn't like I didn't want to either. If I had the chance, of course I'd want to, but Miyagi didn't seem to feel the same. After all the times we'd kissed, it seemed too late for her to refuse, yet she still did.

I couldn't understand why Miyagi was so determined to avoid kissing me, and even if I asked, she probably wouldn't tell me. If I tried to push her for an explanation, she'd just order me to stop, and that would be the end of it.

Miyagi was always unfair like that.

Even though she wouldn't let me kiss her, she'd still ask me to

show her the pendant. She'd order me to unbutton the third button of my blouse, touch my chest, and do whatever she pleased, and I wouldn't be able to say no. But if I wanted to touch her, there was no way she'd allow it. She wasn't interested in making any more trades, either.

Miyagi shouldn't have been so nice to me when I was sick. She shouldn't have let me kiss her, and now, because she hadn't pushed me away that day, I couldn't help but get my hopes up.

「Miyagi.」

I poked her shoulder, trying to get her attention.

「What do you want? I'm studying.」

Miyagi's voice sounded like I was bothering her. I slipped my finger into her moving mouth.

「Lick it.」

I said, but instead of licking, Miyagi bit my finger.

It hurt.

Her teeth clamped down on my finger even harder than before.

With my free hand, I stroked her cheek, then her ear.

When I tugged on her earlobe, her bite eased, and I pressed my fingertip against her tongue.

「Don't bite it. I told you to lick it.」

I wasn't giving her an order.

I had no right to make Miyagi obey me, so it was just a simple request. If she wanted, she could've bitten me again or pulled my finger out herself, but she didn't—instead, she listened to my request.

Something lukewarm clung to my fingertip.

Her tongue pressed against it, slowly gliding along.

The sensation of her mouth's raw warmth made it feel like every nerve in my body was focused on that wet finger.

It wasn't supposed to be this warm, but my fingertip felt like it was on fire. Drawn to her body heat, I felt my own temperature rising with it.

I slowly pulled my finger away, brushing her lips as I did, and she continued licking up to my second joint.

I couldn't say it out loud, but this felt incredibly erotic.

She'd licked my finger like this before.

But back then, it didn't feel this way, and I knew it was because my view of Miyagi had changed.

I pressed my fingertip against her lips again. When I tried pushing my finger back into her mouth, Miyagi firmly gripped my arm and pulled it away.

「That's enough, isn't it?」

Miyagi said as I felt her nails dig into my skin through my blazer.

「If I said no, would you lick it again?」

「Sendai-san, you don't have the right to give me orders, you know that, right?」

「Yeah, I know.」

I acknowledged her words, and Miyagi loosened her grip on my arm. She grabbed the crocodile-covered tissue box and pulled out two tissues.

「Here, dry yourself off with this.」

Following her instructions, I wiped my finger clean, crumpled the tissues into balls, and tossed them in the trash. After landing a clean shot, Miyagi, as though she had been waiting, said,

「This time, you lick my finger. That's your order today.」

She pressed her fingertip against my lips, and instead of replying, I touched it with my tongue.

Just like she'd done earlier, I ran my tongue up to the second joint of her index finger.

When I pressed harder, I could feel the firmness of her bone beneath her skin.

I lightly bit down, and Miyagi attempted to pull away, but I held on, then kissed the back of her hand.

I wonder what Miyagi sees when she looks at me.

What was going through her mind? What sort of things was she feeling?

I wish I could see inside her thoughts.

「That's enough, Sendai-san.」

Her voice was cold as she tried to pull her hand back, but I held onto her and bit down on her fingertip.

As I tried to slip her finger into my mouth, I felt the crocodile-shaped box being pressed against my collarbone.

「I said, that's enough.」

She pushed harder with the crocodile, and I let go.

「I can keep going.」

I grabbed the crocodile-shaped tissue box from Miyagi and took hold of her hand. I leaned in, trying to bring her finger to my lips again, but she quickly pulled it out of my grasp.

「Stop it. I don't want you to continue.」

「Why not?」

「”Why not?” Because it’s kind of–」

「Kind of what?」

「… Never mind.」

She cut herself off before finishing her thought.

「Give me back the crocodile.」

I handed the tissue box back to her, just like she’d requested. Miyagi wiped her finger clean with a tissue, and instead of returning the box to me, she handed me the crumpled tissue.

「So, what were you going to say?」

I tossed the tissue towards the trash can, but unlike my previous attempt, I missed, so I got up and threw it away properly.

「You’re such a pervert, Sendai-san.」

「That is definitely not what you were about to say earlier.」

I sat back down beside her and patted the crocodile’s head in her hands.

「Hey, Miyagi, did it feel good at least?」

「Shut up, Sendai-san. I’m going back to studying, so don’t bother me anymore.」

I knew Miyagi wouldn’t tell me if it felt good.

But still, it would be nice if she felt that way.

The Things Miyagi Won't Tell Me (II)

Part 85

After feeding Miyagi some chips, she served us frozen Hamburg steaks and instant soup for dinner. It was a quick, simple meal, just like what we always ate.

She asked me to stay for dinner, but didn't invite me to spend the night, so I left after we finished eating. There were some things Miyagi would never say, and the things she did say were usually cold, as if to push me away. That was just how she was, and I had always been okay with it.

— Until last month.

I stopped jotting down the notes from the blackboard and glanced at the clock—only five minutes left until lunch.

My focus drifted back to the board as I absentmindedly doodled a crocodile in my notebook.

It had been a few days since I'd seen Miyagi, and I found myself wishing she'd say something she normally wouldn't.

September felt like the tail end of summer break, and graduation had still seemed distant back then. Then, October came and went in a blur, with midterms and preparations for the cultural festival keeping me too busy to think about how little time we had left. But now that it was November, the reality of graduation felt much closer. There were still days ahead of us, but with winter break coming up and all the optional attendance days in our third term, it didn't seem like enough.

There wasn't anything specific I wanted to hear from Miyagi, but I just wanted her to say something different. After realizing how kind Miyagi could be when I was sick, I've been wanting more of that from her.

I drew tissues growing from the back of the crocodile in my notebook.

Not long after, the bell rang, and the teacher dismissed us for lunch. I put my books away and made my way to Umina's desk, tapping her on the shoulder.

「Umina, I'm going to buy my lunch today, so you should start eating without me.」

With my wallet in hand, I made my way toward the door, weaving through the desks. Just as I was about to step out, I heard Umina's voice calling out to me.

「Hazuki, get me some strawberry juice! I'll pay you back later.」

「Me too!」

Mariko added, and I raised my hand in acknowledgment.

「Okay.」

It wasn't a big ask, so I quickly agreed and turned to step into the hallway. But as I did, I accidentally bumped into someone.

「Whoa!」

To be fair, I hadn't been watching where I was going.

I wasn't in any rush, but I wasn't paying attention either.

「Sorry! Are you okay?」

I blurted out an apology and looked at the person I ran into. It was someone I recognized.

「Oh, no, it was my fault as well.」

It was Utsunomiya Maika.

Miyagi mentioned her often, and I always saw them together, so I knew her face well. But to Utsunomiya, I was just a former classmate. We weren't really friends, so I kept my words polite.

「Are you alright?」

「Yeah, I'm fine.」

Utsunomiya answered, and we started walking down the same direction.

There weren't many places to go within the school. The hallways were straight and narrow, with classrooms on one side and windows on the other. It was lunchtime, so the usual destinations were either the bathroom or the school store, and Utsunomiya seemed to be going the same way as me.

「Um, I'm not sure if you remember, but I'm Utsunomiya. We were in the same class last year, Sendai-san.」

Utsunomiya, who had been walking slightly ahead, suddenly stopped to introduce herself.

「Of course I remember.」

I'd heard her name countless times from Miyagi.

Obviously, I couldn't say that, so I gave a simple, safe response, and we continued down the hallway in silence.

Though she'd started the conversation, Utsunomiya went quiet again. I figured she probably felt obligated to say something, since we were former classmates that bumped into each other and were now heading in the same direction, but the silence was more awkward than before.

I didn't have much to say either, so we walked along quietly.

Since we were going the same way, I couldn't exactly leave either.

Silence with Miyagi never bothered me, but with Utsunomiya, it felt uncomfortable. She wasn't a stranger, but she wasn't a close friend either. The silence felt heavy, and I wanted to break it with something, anything.

That being said, there were only so many topics we could talk about, so I decided to go with the safest one.

「Which university are you thinking of applying to, Utsunomiya?」

She told me the name of her first choice.

「Oh, I'm also aiming for a university outside the prefecture.」

When she asked which one, I told her the name and added, "Maybe we'll run into each other if we both get in."

「Oh, Shiori– uh, I mean, Miyagi Shiori, who was in our class last year, is also applying to the same university as me, so you might run into――」

「Huh?」

I blurted out without thinking, interrupting Utsunomiya.

Miyagi Shiori.

It was a name I was all too familiar with, one that didn't need to be repeated, yet hearing it made me stop in my tracks.

As far as I was aware, Miyagi was set on applying to a local university.

―― So, why…?

「Is something wrong?」

My voice had come out louder than expected, leaving Utsunomiya with a confused expression on her face.

「Oh, sorry. I was just surprised; I didn't realize Miyagi's grades were that good.」

I knew that might've been a bit rude to say, but I couldn't come up with anything better to bury the awkwardness with.

「Yeah, it seems like she's been studying really hard lately.」

Utsunomiya replied, still looking puzzled, but not particularly skeptical.

Utsunomiya probably only mentioned Miyagi's name to fill the silence and was caught off guard by my reaction. If I could just steer the conversation away from Miyagi, we could chat about anything else until we reached the school store.

I resumed walking, but as soon as I took a step forward, my mouth decided to move on its own.

「Is Miyagi actually trying to get into the same school as you?」

「Well, she brought it up rather suddenly, so I can't tell if she was being serious, but she did say she at least wanted to give it a shot.」

「Huh, I see.」

「… Um, Sendai-san… are you and Shiori friends?」

Our conversation was meant to be casual, but Utsunomiya's tone shifted lower, as if trying to gauge the situation. She looked a bit tense and perhaps a little nervous. Maybe she had been waiting to ask me this all along.

「Why do you ask?」

I shot a question back at her while maintaining a smile on my face.

「I had a hunch from that time you and Shiori ran into each other in the hallway. Plus, it sometimes feels like you're stealing glances at her whenever we pass by you. And there was also that time you came to our class to look for her.」

She was quite perceptive.

I couldn't recall sneaking glances at Miyagi, but we'd definitely made eye contact before. Although we'd agreed not to interact with each other at school, we were deeply connected outside of it, so my reactions were likely involuntary.

「No, we're not friends. And the only reason I was looking for her was because a teacher had asked me to.」

I kept smiling and picked up my pace slightly.

「… I guess it was just my imagination, then.」

Utsunomiya murmured before adding, “I’m going to buy something to drink,” and walked off toward the vending machines.

Since we weren’t particularly close, I didn’t feel the need to accompany her. Instead, I decided to buy a sandwich first, then get the juice boxes Umina and Mariko had requested earlier before heading back to the classroom, where the two were excitedly chatting about their boyfriends.

It was pretty fun spending lunch with Umina and the others, and it did make me a bit sad to think that soon, I wouldn’t have the chance to hear their lighthearted chatter anymore. But today, their words felt like background noise, and I found myself neither enjoying nor feeling sad about it.

I simply nodded along while munching on my sandwich.

I had no idea Miyagi was aiming for a university outside the prefecture.

I had considered suggesting a nearby school in case applying to the university I was aiming for was impossible for her, but I knew she would coldly dismiss it.

Yet, here she was, suddenly aiming for the same university as Utsunomiya—a school not far from my first choice.

But then again, nothing was finalized yet.

She could still be weighing her options.

But given how much she was studying even after our midterms were done, what Utsunomiya said earlier was probably true.

If that were the case, then the fact that Miyagi went out of her way to hide this from me probably meant she didn’t want me to know, and that her motivations for choosing that university likely had little to do with me.

It would've been nice if the reason why she wanted to attend a university outside of the prefecture was to be with me, but it made more sense if she was doing it to stay close to Utsunomiya.

Yeah, I can't imagine it being for any other reason.

There was no surprise there.

Miyagi and I didn't have the sort of relationship where we'd promise each other we'd attend the same university or at least choose ones close together.

She was determined to let our current relationship end when graduation rolled around, and she wouldn't even let me kiss her anymore. She probably didn't care about us parting ways after graduation either.

But Utsunomiya was different; she was someone Miyagi didn't want to lose. It was perfectly understandable that she chose Utsunomiya over me. To Miyagi, I was merely a former classmate, not even a friend.

Sure, there was nothing unusual about that at all.

But I definitely wasn't happy about it.

Miyagi and Utsunomiya were just friends, nothing more – that much, I was certain of.

But even if Miyagi and I weren't friends, I was closer to her in a way Utsunomiya wasn't. And yet, Miyagi still chose Utsunomiya—who was just a regular friend— over me. I wouldn't go as far as to say I was annoyed, but I could definitely feel my stomach churn.

The sandwich I was eating didn't taste great either.

It felt like my sense of taste had been warped by Miyagi to the point where even the instant food she prepared—or rather, warmed up—tasted a lot better than this.

I forced down the dry sandwich and followed it with a sip of milk tea. Then, I heard a notification from my phone in my pocket. Checking the screen, I saw the usual message from Miyagi.

But I wanted to have a conversation with her somewhere other than her home.

I responded to her message with something different than usual this time.

『Meet me in the music preparation room after school. I'll be waiting for you.』

I never got a reply from her, not even after all our classes had finished.

I wasn't surprised in the slightest; I had expected her not to respond.

But either way, I made my way straight to the music preparation room.

The Things Miyagi Won't Tell Me (III)

Part 86

There was a chance Miyagi would come, but there was also a chance she wouldn't.

She had shown up the last time I called her here after the cultural festival, but after what happened that day, there was a good chance she wouldn't want to today.

Still, if she did come, I wanted to ask her about what Utsunomiya had told me earlier.

—— I was feeling pretty awful right now.

The pain in my stomach had faded, but an uneasy feeling lingered in my chest.

My head was full of negative thoughts, and it was putting me in a bad mood. It was the same feeling I got whenever I saw my parents doting on my older sister.

I fixated on one thing, and it let the pessimism creep in.

This wasn't good for me.

I'd always been pretty good at using my head—getting by in life, having fun and doing well at school, and maintaining my status. But now, it felt like everything was falling apart.

I inhaled deeply, then exhaled.

I paced around the small classroom.

Even if I had nothing to do with Miyagi choosing a school outside the prefecture, she still picked one close to the school I wanted to attend.

It didn't matter why she chose it. What mattered most was that she'd be nearby, and that was better than nothing.

That's how I needed to think about it.

As much as I hated to admit it, I didn't want to be apart from Miyagi. The thought that she might have chosen the school because of Utsunomiya unsettled me, making me feel like I was wandering alone in a bleak, colorless world. But instead of dwelling on that, I reminded myself that the most important thing was that we'd still be near each other.

As long as Miyagi stayed close by, our relationship wouldn't have to end so quickly. Thinking about it like that made it feel easier to let go of some of my emotions.

It was impossible to get all my feelings in order, so it was better to just be more mindful and approach them differently, instead of letting myself spiral into despair.

Even though I couldn't fully come to terms with my feelings yet, as long as I guided them in a more positive direction, it didn't seem like such a bad approach.

But there was just one problem.

Miyagi wasn't the type to be honest.

Even if I asked her again about which university she was aiming for, I doubted she'd give me a straight answer. And I didn't want to bring up Utsunomiya, either. If I did, Miyagi would probably deny it and say she only asked her for advice—not because she actually intended to apply.

So, confirming whether what I'd heard earlier was true without mentioning Utsunomiya seemed difficult.

Still, a part of me didn't want to let this go so easily.

If Utsunomiya had told Miyagi about what happened during lunch—how she'd mentioned Miyagi's plans to apply to the same university…

If Miyagi knew I was aware of her plans, things could get messy. I wouldn't be surprised if she ended up telling Utsunomiya she'd changed her mind and was applying to a local university

instead.

I stopped pacing around and glanced at the clock. Fifteen minutes had passed since I'd arrived.

「I guess she's not coming.」

I'll give it another five minutes.

Perhaps because December was just around the corner, it felt a little chilly in the music preparation room. This wasn't exactly the best place to hang around waiting for someone.

And even though Miyagi could be cold, she didn't seem like the kind of person who would keep me waiting for thirty or forty minutes—or at least, I hoped she wasn't.

I leaned against a shelf filled with instruments and glanced at the door.

I slowly closed my eyes, and just as I opened them again, I heard the door open quietly.

Standing there was someone wearing a skirt that wasn't too long or too short.

Her brows were furrowed, and she looked clearly displeased.

She didn't offer me a single word of concern like, "Sorry I'm late" or "Did I keep you waiting?"

She simply walked up to me silently.

Her hair, which reached slightly past her shoulders, swayed lightly as she moved before stopping in front of me. Then, with an irritated tone, she asked,

「What happened to our rule of not interacting at school?」

She smacked her bag against my leg.

「If you care that much about the rules, you didn't have to come. But since you're here, I guess they don't matter that much, huh?」

「I'm going home.」

Miyagi's tone was even colder than the room itself, and she turned to leave, but I called out to stop her.

「Wait. I called you here because I needed to talk to you about something.」

「I bet it's just going to be about something pointless anyway, right? We could've just talked at my place.」

She grumbled as she dropped her bag on the floor and stared at me.

「I just wanted to make sure you couldn't give me any orders.」

I said with a smile, and she shot me a look of clear annoyance in return.

「Fine, if you have something to say, then say it quickly.」

I didn't exactly know what I wanted to say or how to say it. My thoughts were still jumbled, and even if she gave me another five minutes, I felt like I wouldn't be able to get them sorted out. When it came to Miyagi, I was surprisingly slow at organizing my thoughts, so I decided to just ask her directly, like usual.

「… What schools are you applying to?」

「This is what you wanted to talk about?」

「Yeah.」

「You've already asked me this multiple times, you know.」

「I just thought, since you don't have to apply to just one school, maybe you were considering others.」

「I'm not applying to any others.」

Her answer was exactly what I expected.

I gently strummed one of the polished instruments.

Miyagi never liked talking about university.

I wanted to press her further, but I knew she wouldn't give me a straight answer. She always kept me in the dark about things I wanted to know. I had no way of confirming whether what Utsunomiya said earlier was true or not.

「I think you should apply to more schools, though. Since your grades have improved, you could probably aim for better universities. You've worked so hard, so you might as well try.」

Even though I knew it might not work, I tried another approach to get an answer out of her.

「You're so stubborn, Sendai-san. I'm done talking about this.」

「You can't order me around while we're here.」

「I'm not ordering you around. If you want to keep talking to yourself, then go ahead, but I have nothing more to say. I'm going home. Make sure you come over to my place when you're done, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi said, attempting to end the conversation on her own.

I knew that's just how she was, but her cold and blunt attitude still hurt. If I kept pushing, I knew she'd only pull away further, yet I couldn't bring myself to give up. I didn't want her to leave like this.

「Wouldn't it be nice to go to the same university as your friends?」

I wanted to use Utsunomiya as an example, but I held myself back from saying her name.

「… Why are you saying that all of a sudden?」

「It's pretty common, right? Lots of people try to go to the same university as their friends.」

「Speaking of which, Maika mentioned she ran into you at lunch.」

A faint crease appeared between Miyagi's brows as she spoke, sidestepping my question. Her words revealed that Utsunomiya had already filled her in on our lunchtime conversation, and now there was no avoiding the mention of her name.

「I ran into Utsunomiya on my way to the school store.」

「What did you and Maika talk about?」

「She just asked why I was looking for you that day.」

「That's it?」

「Yeah. Did Utsunomiya say anything?」

「She told me the same thing you did.」

「I see.」

It seemed Utsunomiya hadn't shared everything she told me with Miyagi.

If that was the case, it was better not to push things any further.

Ending the conversation here would keep things simple. I knew it was the sensible thing to do, but a part of me still wanted to keep talking.

As Miyagi bent down to pick up her bag, I instinctively grabbed her hand.

「What do you want?」

「Wait, let's chat a bit more.」

「I don't want to. If you have more to say, we can talk about it later at my place.」

「I guess that's true.」

She was right, but I couldn't bring myself to let go of her hand.

Instead, I gripped it tighter, closing any gap between our fingers.

Her hand was colder than when I'd held it the day I was sick.

Even with both of us in the room, our hands were still freezing, probably because of how chilly it was. Either way, I wasn't holding her hand to warm us up.

「I'm trying to go home, so let go of me.」

「Just stay with me like this a little longer.」

I knew if I let go now, I wouldn't get another chance to hold her hand like this anytime soon, so I wasn't ready to release her.

I wanted to keep holding on, to touch her more.

I struggled to process these emotions, probably because Miyagi was always the one touching me.

And I was likely only feeling this way because Miyagi was refusing to tell me anything.

「Miyagi.」

I called her name and stepped closer, but she tried to shake me off.

「I'm not going to let you kiss me, so just let me go home already.」

「I haven't even said anything yet.」

Miyagi's voice was cold, like she had recalled what happened the last time we were here. But all I wanted was to touch her a little more, not kiss her.

「I felt like that's what you were going to say, so I wanted to make it clear first.」

「That's not it. I just wanted to touch you a little. You're always trying to touch me too, aren't you, Miyagi?」

「What do you mean "too"? I haven't touched you at all, Sendai-san.」

I undid the second button on my blouse, something I would never normally do at school, and revealed the pendant hanging around my neck.

「You're always trying to touch this, aren't you?」

Every time I went to Miyagi's place, she'd ask to touch the pendant under my blouse. But whenever I tried to touch her in the same place, she'd always order me to stop.

「I'm just touching the necklace, not you, Sendai-san.」

「But when you do that, you're touching me too. I think it's only fair you let me do the same. It's not right that you're the only one who gets to touch me all the time, Miyagi.」

I moved closer and gently brushed my hand against her cheek.

When I pressed my palm to her skin, Miyagi shivered—probably because it was cold. I let my hand slide down to her neck and began to loosen her necktie, but just as I reached for a button on her blouse, she grabbed my arm to stop me.

「Stop it, Sendai-san. You're such a pervert.」

Miyagi stated firmly as she released my arm.

「I don't have to follow your orders when we're here.」

「That's true. I only pay for your time in my room, not here at school.」

「Exactly, so you should just stay still and let me touch you.」

「But that doesn't mean you have the right to do whatever you want to me at school, either, Sendai-san.」

「But you let me kiss you last time, didn't you?」

Miyagi tightened her necktie, her expression complicated as I reminded her of what happened here before. Then, in a flat, emotionless voice, she said,

「… Fine, if you want to touch me, you'll have to offer me something in return. After all, you love making trades, don't you, Sendai-san?」

「I wouldn't say I "love" making trades, but what do you want in return?」

I had a feeling that whatever she wanted wouldn't be anything good.

Yet, I couldn't help but ask her anyway.

Chapter 27

The Routine of Being with Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 87

I didn't mind being touched by Sendai-san.

But if I let her get away with one thing, she'd definitely push for more, so I couldn't allow her to do whatever she wanted.

Still, I liked the Sendai-san who was willing to make deals and listened to me without fuss.

I sat down on an old chair in the corner of the music preparation room.

「Lick my foot.」

Sendai-san had heard me say this plenty of times before, but for some reason, she looked surprised.

「Huh?」

「Did you not hear me? I told you to lick my foot.」

「… Here?」

「Do it, and I'll let you touch me.」

Sendai-san rarely disobeyed my orders, but we had always done them at my place, so I wasn't sure if she'd follow through at school.

I chose this knowing she probably wouldn't.

Any order that Sendai-san would want to refuse would've worked, but I couldn't think of any command that would make her hesitate like this one. If she didn't want to go through with the

trade, she'd have no choice but to give up, and this seemed like a simple way to make that happen.

「We're at school, not your place. You know that, right? Sure, not many people come here, but what if someone did see us? This is way too much, even for a trade.」

Just as I expected, Sendai-san started listing all the obvious reasons why she wouldn't go along with it.

「So, does that mean you're not willing to fulfill your end of the bargain?」

When I asked, she glanced over at the door of the music preparation room, her eyes wavering like she was debating.

While she hesitated, I decided to answer for her.

「Looks like the trade's off, then. We can agree on that, right? I'm heading home now. Make sure to come over right after.」

Even if she had more to say, we could discuss it at my place.

Even though she kept asking about things I didn't want to talk about, I preferred handling it at home, where I could just order her to stop whenever I wanted.

I got up from the chair and grabbed my bag from the floor. Just as I was about to leave, she called out to me.

「Wait.」

Before I could reply, she dragged the chair towards me.

「Sit down. You want me to lick your foot, don't you?」

「Don't force yourself to do it if you don't want to.」

「I'm not. Just sit down already.」

「And what if someone sees us?」

「I'll just say you ordered me to do it, so it's fine.」

「That doesn't seem fine at all.」

「Whether it is or not doesn't matter. This is what you asked for, right? Now sit down.」

Sendai-san had hesitated just moments ago.

The fact that she hadn't given in right away showed this trade was pushing the limits of what she was willing to accept, yet she still agreed to go along with it anyway.

If she was willing to go this far, whatever she wanted from me couldn't be anything good.

「… What is it you want from me, Sendai-san?」

「I told you. I just want to touch you.」

「That's all?」

「Yeah, it is. I won't do anything that'll upset you, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san's calm voice and steady gaze made it seem like she wasn't lying, but I couldn't believe she'd go as far as licking my foot just so she could touch me. Why would she even want something like that in the first place? What made her even want it? It didn't make any sense. Plus, I doubted she was being serious.

Sendai-san wasn't looking at anything but me right now, and that was enough for me to set aside why she accepted the trade.

With two buttons undone on her blouse, her necklace was visible, and just seeing it around her neck made me feel like she really did belong to me. I wanted her to keep looking at me like this until we graduated, and for now, she was. Thinking about that way, this didn't seem too bad.

「Hurry up and take a seat already, Miyagi.」

Moreover, I was the one who suggested making a trade in the first place.

I sat down on the chair out of my own will, not because she told me to. Slowly, she knelt down, taking off my indoor shoes and

socks.

The door to the music preparation room was closed, but as if feeling uneasy, Sendai-san glanced over at it, as if checking to make sure.

There were no sounds of voices or footsteps in the hallway, just the quiet sound of Sendai-san's breathing.

Instead of using her tongue, she ran her fingers along my foot. Her touch felt ticklish, so I lightly kicked her leg.

「Don't do that. I told you to lick it.」

In response, Sendai-san grabbed my heel, lifting my foot slightly and bringing her face closer. Something not as wet as a tongue pressed against the base of my toes, and I realized it was her lips. The soft sounds of her lips kissing my foot filled the air.

Frustrated that she wasn't doing as I said, I pushed my foot to her lips, and something warmer and wetter moved to my ankle.

「Is this good enough?」

She asked, lifting her head.

「No.」

There was no way this was good enough. Sendai-san had been the one who ultimately decided to do this, so I couldn't just let her do it half-heartedly and leave it at that.

「Lick it properly. You're just pressing your lips against it.」

「I don't think there's that much of a difference.」

「There is.」

I reaffirmed my stance, and Sendai-san pulled my foot closer, biting down on my big toe. She seemed to hold back a little, but it was still hard enough to hurt. Before I could complain, she started licking the top of my foot, her tongue slowly trailing up to my ankle.

The warmth of her tongue against my skin wasn't unpleasant. The first time I made her lick my foot, I'd felt a bit disgusted—even though I was the one who made her do it. But there was also a sense of superiority that came with it, knowing that I'd made someone like her, who had nothing in common with me, obey my commands.

This time, it was different.

Her tongue slid over the bone of my ankle, sending a shiver up my spine. It wasn't the disgust I'd felt before—it was something else. I pushed my foot closer, pressing it against her tongue, and she didn't back away. Her warmth felt comforting in this chilly room.

And yet, frustration rose inside me. Sendai-san accepted trades like this, but she wouldn't fully submit to me.

Why?

Why was she going to a university outside the prefecture?

She kept trying to get me to change my first-choice university, but she wasn't willing to change her own.

I knew the real reason Sendai-san was determined to go to a university outside the prefecture—it was because of her family. But it still annoyed me. She was willing to do things like this when we were at school, yet she didn't even give what I'd said last time about staying here a second thought. Even though I understood her reasons, I still couldn't accept them.

That's why I didn't want to tell Sendai-san the truth. I'd told Maika I was applying to the same university as her, but with Sendai-san, I didn't want her thinking I was doing it just to follow her. Still, I couldn't help but wonder. If I did tell her, what would she say with those lips and tongue currently licking my foot? What would her gentle—but not always kind—voice say?

「Do you still want me to keep going, Miyagi?」

She asked, her words not answering the questions that were on my mind.

「Keep going.」

I said, giving her a gentle kick.

She frowned briefly, but soon lowered her gaze.

This time, it wasn't her lips or tongue but her fingertips that brushed my ankle, gliding up to my calf. She lifted my skirt slightly, her lips moving to my knee, and then her tongue followed.

Her tongue traced my knee slowly, adding just a bit more pressure now and then. It was different from before, and when I tried to pull away instinctively, she pulled my leg right back.

A suffocating feeling crept into my chest, as if something had grabbed hold of my heart. Sendai-san kept licking my leg like she was wiping up a spill.

'This isn't good,' I thought, and a memory I'd rather forget came flooding back.

The last day of summer vacation, in my room, with Sendai-san.

I held my breath and then exhaled slowly as the memories poured out.

It was always like this whenever I let my guard down.

The other day, when I ordered her to lick my finger, she hadn't done it normally. There was something different in the way she did it, as if there had been a deeper meaning to it.

「You can stop now.」

I tried to push Sendai-san's head away from my knee, but instead of backing off, she sucked on it and gently bit down.

Back during summer break, it didn't seem wrong to do these things with Sendai-san. It felt natural at the time, but now, I realized it wasn't something we should be doing anymore.

I was wrong to think it was okay to let her keep going like this.

These feelings I had for her weren't right.

Her lips moved slightly above my knee.

「Sendai-san, stop. That's enough.」

My voice wasn't loud, but in the quiet corner of the room, there was no way she couldn't hear me.

But instead of stopping, she lifted my skirt just enough to expose the skin of my thighs. Her lips pressed against the inside of them, leaving warm traces on the skin that should've felt cold in this chilly room.

The faint sound of kissing reached my ears.

—— We can't go any further than this.

As Sendai-san's hand started to slide further up my skirt, I held her back by the head.

The Routine of Being with Sendai-san (II)

Part 88

Looking at what was happening, I realized how bad this must have looked. Sendai-san's head was between my legs, and my skirt was so disheveled that no one should ever see me like this. What made it worse was that I was the only one left in this embarrassing state. I felt like I could come up with a dozen, maybe twenty things to complain about, but for now, I shoved Sendai-san's head away and quickly straightened my skirt.

「I never said you could do that.」

I had ordered her to lick my feet plenty of times in the past, but she'd never gone this far.

I glared at Sendai-san, who had the nerve to act like nothing was wrong.

「What do you mean? I only licked your foot like you told me to.」

「Yeah, but what you did just now wasn't licking.」

「Oh, really? So what about this?」

Sendai-san lifted my skirt slightly and brushed her tongue against my knee. Caught off guard, I flinched. I felt the wet sensation creeping closer to my thigh, so I quickly shoved her away by the forehead.

「Quit it. That's not even my foot.」

「No, but isn't your knee part of your leg? And your foot's part of your leg too, right?」

「That doesn't make it the same.」

「So where exactly does the leg begin and end, then?」

As she said this, Sendai-san slid her hand down to my calf and started tracing her fingers along it until I slapped her hand away.

「Okay, we're done here, so stop pondering what makes a leg a leg. Now, move.」

I shoved her back again, and this time she moved away, looking a bit let down. But after only a moment, she grabbed my foot again.

「Let me help you put your socks back on.」

「I can do it myself.」

「Even though they're way over here?」

I glanced over at the pair of indoor shoes Sendai-san had taken off, with my socks still stuffed inside them. They were right next to her, and definitely not in a spot I could easily reach from where I was sitting.

「Give them back to me.」

「I said I'd help you put them back on, so just sit still.」

With my foot still in her grasp, even if I wanted to stand up, I couldn't. Without her letting go, I had no choice but to stay seated, unable to reach for my socks or put them on by myself.

No matter how much I disliked it, I had to let her do it.

She gently ran her fingers over the top of my foot.

Her fingers brushed my skin just enough to tickle before Sendai-san slid my socks on, so effortlessly it was clear her hands were used to doing this.

I hated how easily she could do something like this.

This wasn't normal, yet Sendai-san accepted it as if it were, getting used to it like it was just part of her routine. The fact that I'd become a part of her daily life like this made me feel uneasy.

But Sendai-san didn't seem to care what I was thinking.

She slipped my indoor shoes back on like it was the most ordinary thing in the world, and then pressed a kiss against my knee.

「I thought I told you not to do that.」

「I'll keep that in mind next time.」

Sendai-san said, showing no signs of remorse or any intention of being more careful.

If I stayed seated, who knew what might happen next. I stood up, patting down my blazer even though she hadn't touched it. Sendai-san stood up too, brushing dust off her skirt, then said,

「So, about our trade. I get to touch you now, right?」

She said, as if entitled to it.

「Fine, but you're not allowed to kiss me or take off any part of my uniform. Not even a button.」

「Isn't it unfair to add extra conditions now?」

「Not at all. You're always quick to try something weird, so I need to set limits. Besides, you promised not to do anything that'd upset me, didn't you?」

This was my way of punishing her for going too far earlier.

—— At least, that's what I told myself. Really, it was to make sure she didn't push the limits and turn it into something more. Even if she was only planning to touch me, I doubted it would stop there, considering her past behavior.

「That's true. But like I said, I won't do anything to upset you.」

Her voice was as soft as the wind rustling the leaves, and she smiled. But it was the same smile she always wore at school, which only made me trust her less.

「Seriously, don't do anything weird.」

I said, trying to reinforce it one more time, and she responded, sounding a bit dissatisfied.

「Do you really not trust me that much?」

「You should reflect on what you did earlier.」

「I already did, don't worry.」

「… Okay, fine then.」

I was still a little uneasy, but even though Sendai-san sometimes went too far, she always kept her promises. So, I figured I should keep mine too.

I watched her take one step, then another closer to me.

Not knowing what she was about to do, my body tensed up.

Sendai-san came as close as she usually did when we kissed, and I instinctively stepped back, bumping my foot into the chair.

A loud clang echoed as she grabbed my arm and pulled me into an embrace.

「What's this supposed to be?」

I muttered, confused. We were even closer than when we kissed.

「I think most people would call this a "hug."」

「I know that much.」

I understood what it was, but with how close we were, I couldn't help but ask. It was my first time being held like this, and in this cold room, my body felt strangely warm and light.

My heart started racing too.

It thudded so loudly that I was sure even Sendai-san could hear it.

「Please stop telling me to “stay here.”」

She suddenly said something I hadn’t expected.

「What are you talking about?」

I had a vague idea of what she meant, but I asked anyway. Her arms tightened around me.

「I’m saying I want to be able to have meals with you even when we’re in university.」

I wondered what kind of face she was making right now.

With both arms around me, I couldn’t move to see her expression.

All I could rely on was her voice next to my ear, but it was flat, making it hard to gauge her emotions. I couldn’t even imagine what she looked like.

「You don’t get to decide my future for me, Sendai-san.」

I answered softly, and she quietly replied,

「Even now, we eat together at your house, right? Don’t you think it’d be nice to share a meal together now and then, even after we graduate?」

Without acknowledging my attempt to reject her, she kept talking about what she wanted after graduation.

I didn’t know how to respond to her like this.

The future she mentioned did sound nice, though.

Eating with Sendai-san always made the food taste better than when I ate alone, and just having her beside me, even in silence, felt comforting. I couldn’t help but think it’d be dull not seeing her anymore after we graduated.

But still, I didn’t have the confidence to fully trust what Sendai-san was saying. Even now, I couldn’t see her face, and her

voice gave no clues about her feelings. How could I possibly believe she truly wanted to keep sharing meals with me after we graduated?

「Miyagi?」

Her voice echoed softly in my ear.

「We're done here.」

I tried to pull away from her embrace before any daydreams about a future together could form, but her arms stayed tightly wrapped around my back.

「Can't we stay like this a little longer?」

「No.」

「Come on, it's fine, isn't it?」

「No, it's not.」

「Just say it's okay… Shiori.」

Her whisper was accompanied by something soft brushing against my ear.

Her lips.

I felt them press firmly, tickling me, so I pushed her away with all my strength.

「Don't call me by my name.」

Like tape slowly peeling from paper, she pulled herself off me, and I wiped my ear.

「Considering what you made me do, don't you think that was too short?」

Sendai-san asked, sounding disgruntled as she looked at me.

「No, that's enough.」

She should've known the extra conditions left her with very

few options, so there was no reason for her to complain. Plus, kissing my ear was already pushing the “no kissing” boundary.

Besides, being in her arms like that had felt just like——

I sighed, as if to let the thought slip away, and reached for my bag.

「If I keep following your orders, will you let me touch you again?」

「No.」

The more time I spent with Sendai-san, the more natural it felt to have her by my side. Sharing meals, staying together after graduation—it all felt like a routine that could continue, with me giving her orders as always.

But deep down, I couldn’t see it happening.

「You say that, but you’ll still come to this room if I ask, right?」

「I won’t, so don’t even bother asking.」

「Okay, okay.」

Her response was so casual that I doubted she even heard me. Then, she grabbed my hand.

「What are you doing?」

「We’re going home together, right?」

「While holding hands like this?」

「Come on, I’m obviously joking.」

Sendai-san smiled as she let go of my hand.

「How long should I wait?」

「Ten minutes.」

「What about five?」

「I have a feeling you'd come running after me, so, no.」

I doubted she'd actually run after me.

But I just needed a little time alone. Too much had happened in such a short time, and my already jumbled thoughts were only getting worse.

I turned my back to Sendai-san as I left the music preparation room.

Walking down the hall, my footsteps echoed, and I glanced back.

As expected, her silhouette wasn't there.

The Routine of Being with Sendai-san (III)

Part 89

I left the old school building and headed toward the entrance. It wasn't like the school was completely empty, but the hallways were so quiet, it felt as though no one else was around. If it had been dark, I might have been scared enough to run, but since it was still light out, I walked quickly to the lockers without passing anyone on the way.

I switched my shoes and stepped outside, shivering as the cold wind hit me. I glanced back over my shoulder.

Sendai-san wasn't there.

Of course she wasn't. I'd told her to wait ten minutes before coming, and Sendai-san was just keeping that promise. If not, she would've been walking beside me right now since we were both heading in the same direction.

I had asked Sendai-san to come over today. If we walked home together, we could've passed the time together, but we agreed not to interact at school.

I let out a sigh.

The air wasn't cold enough to see my breath, but it lacked any warmth, making it feel even chillier than last year.

It felt colder without Sendai-san here.

—— No, that wasn't it.

Sure, being close to Sendai-san in the music preparation room made it warmer, but that was just because of the presence of another person. It would've felt warm even if it wasn't Sendai-san, and now it was cold outside simply because it was cold—not because she wasn't here.

I faced forward again.

If I stayed any longer, she'd catch up to me.

Her sudden hug, and how she rejected my words when I told her to "stay here"—I was curious about it all, but there wasn't time to dwell on it. If I thought too deeply, I'd just end up overanalyzing every little thing she did.

I passed through the school gates and headed home, walking fast enough not to get out of breath.

As I went, I passed by a lot of people and walked by several stores until I stopped in front of the supermarket I usually visited a few times a week.

Right, there's nothing left in the fridge.

With nothing stocked, that meant no frozen food, no ready-made meals, not even instant noodles.

Unless Sendai-san did something ridiculous like running all the way to my place, I had enough time to pick up a few things.

I walked into the supermarket and grabbed a basket.

I tossed some cabbages, potatoes, pre-made curry and stew, and a few frozen items into my basket. After hesitating for a moment, I added pork, chicken, and curry roux before heading to the cashier.

The bags felt heavier than usual as I walked outside, and twenty minutes had passed since I'd left.

I checked my phone and saw a few messages from Sendai-san, who had already arrived at my place before me.

I started to reply but decided against it.

After everything that happened today, it would probably be better if she just went home.

I should have told her not to come at all today, instead of asking her to wait ten minutes before leaving the music preparation room. I wasn't sure how to face her after what she'd done.

I swung my bags lightly, filled with things I normally wouldn't buy, as I walked. The weight slowed me down.

Dragging my feet, I made my way back home. When I reached the entrance, the lights of my apartment building came into view, and I heard a familiar, disgruntled voice.

「You left ten minutes ahead of me, so how come you're late? Did you even check your phone?」

I turned toward the voice and saw Sendai-san, standing by the wall. I wouldn't have been surprised if she wasn't there. The tip of her nose was a little red, and I realized I had made her wait outside long enough for the cold to get to her—even though she was usually the one who complained about being too warm.

「You waited for me?」

「Of course I did. You were the one who told me to come ten minutes later, so I'd be surprised if you were just ignoring me. It's freezing today—you shouldn't have taken any detours.」

"If it was that cold, you should've just gone home."

For a moment, I considered saying it, but instead, I held up the bags I was carrying.

「Here.」

「What? Are you telling me to carry your bags for you?」

「These are the ingredients I want you to use to make us dinner.」

I said, as I pushed the bags into Sendai-san's hands and unlocked the entrance of the building.

「Am I making us dinner tonight?」

「Yeah, it's an order.」

Hearing something she couldn't argue with, Sendai-san mumbled, "I see," and started walking. We rode the elevator up to

the sixth floor together, but she didn't try to hold my hand or say anything. After taking off our shoes at the entrance, we headed straight to the kitchen.

I turned on the lights and air conditioner while she started putting everything away. It wasn't awkward, but there was nothing to say either. She was acting like she hadn't just hugged me in the music preparation room earlier.

She was always like this—pretending like nothing was wrong whenever something happened. Normally, it'd bother me, but I was grateful for it today. It would've been more uncomfortable if she'd treated it like something had happened.

When she finished putting everything away, I handed her a five-thousand-yen bill.

「What if I said I didn't need this?」

Sendai-san looked at the five-thousand-yen bill as if she were seeing it for the first time. But by now, this exchange had become a kind of ritual for us. Our relationship wouldn't feel right unless she accepted the bill. If she started making dinner without taking it, it wouldn't be an order anymore. Worse, she might think I was influenced by what she said earlier about us eating together after graduation.

That wasn't why I wanted someone else to make dinner tonight.

I just wanted to eat something made by someone else for a change—there was no deeper reason.

「If you'd rather go home, you don't have to take it.」

I started to take the five-thousand-yen bill away, but Sendai-san grabbed it from my hand before I could.

「Thanks. So, you want me to make dinner tonight?」

Sendai-san asked as she stuffed the bill in her wallet.

「Yeah.」

「Do you want to eat first and study after?」

「Sure.」

「Alright, so what do you want me to make?」

「Up to you.」

I replied casually, and Sendai-san, who had been staring into the fridge, turned her gaze to me.

「You're leaving it up to me, huh? You were the one who bought all these ingredients. Did you not have something in mind?」

「Just make whatever you want. I don't know how to cook, so I just bought random stuff.」

「You really didn't think this through, did you?」

「Like I said, I didn't know what to buy.」

I answered honestly, and Sendai-san let out a groan, closing the refrigerator door as she stood up.

「I'm not that good at cooking. I can't just whip something up with a random mix of ingredients.」

「Well, we could just heat those up instead.」

I pointed at the instant and pre-made food on the table.

「I guess we could, but… then it wouldn't count as me making dinner anymore. How about curry? We've got potatoes and meat. No onions or carrots, but it should be fine.」

Since I was the one giving the orders in the first place, it would've been fine to just go with instant food, but Sendai-san was strangely stubborn about these things. I didn't mind this side of her, but it could be a pain sometimes.

If she were more laid-back, she wouldn't try to meddle in my future like she had been. It would save me from thinking about unnecessary things.

「I'll leave it to you, then.」

There were a lot of things I wanted to say, but for now, I decided to let her handle dinner. I left the kitchen area and sat at the counter, watching her from the living room.

Once she made up her mind, there was no point in saying anything more.

Even before I said I'd leave it to her, Sendai-san was already washing the potatoes and had set out a pot and knives.

When she'd said, "I want us to share meals together," I doubt she meant she'd be the one making them, but seeing her cook wasn't unpleasant. There was a sense of ease, knowing there was someone else in the house besides me.

It felt even better knowing that that "someone" was Sendai-san, and I couldn't help but wish these moments could turn into a regular routine. But this routine could easily vanish one day if she decided she didn't want it anymore.

Even if she liked the way things were today, there was no guarantee she'd feel the same tomorrow.

Thinking about it like that made me feel a little down.

Looking at her now, it seemed like she was just accommodating me, much like how she'd always bought magazines she didn't care for just to have something to talk about with Ibaraki-san. There was no benefit for her in being with me, and it just made more sense to think of it that way.

While she stir-fried the potatoes she had already peeled and chopped, I asked her a question.

「… Sendai-san, are you really not going to stay?」

It wasn't something I needed to gather my courage to ask, but it still felt difficult. My mouth struggled to form the words, and my voice caught in my throat. It must've sounded like I'd asked something more important than I meant it to, and I regretted it as soon as it left my lips.

Sendai-san didn't answer.

I hadn't said it that quietly, but she continued cooking the curry.

I didn't want to force her to respond, so I decided to drop it.

As I rested my forehead against the counter, I heard her voice.

「Does that mean you want me to stay?」

「I'm the one asking you here.」

I lifted my head and saw her holding a cabbage, preparing to make a salad.

「I'm not going to apply to any local universities.」

The vague question I'd asked was met with the clear answer I'd already known. I'd expected it, but I couldn't help complaining after she'd spent all that effort trying to change my mind.

「… If you're just trying to live alone, you could still do that here.」

「But I don't want to do it here.」

She replied curtly as she chopped the cabbage. Then, in a voice barely audible over the chopping, she added,

「How many more months do we have left to share meals like this again?」

She asked, as if deliberately.

「Figure it out yourself.」

「The graduation ceremony is at the beginning of March, and we don't really have to go to school in February, so I guess we've got until December or January?」

「I guess so.」

The graduation ceremony wasn't that close yet.

Even so, the thought of Sendai-san not coming over after February made me too sad to even want to eat what she was cooking. It felt like it'd be too cold if half of this room was empty, but it wasn't just that. It was starting to feel like she belonged by my side. Her presence had become so routine that it would be strange not to have her around.

If I'd known it would come to this, part of me wished something had happened that day during summer break. Though I'd convinced myself we shouldn't be doing things like that, if things had gone differently, maybe I wouldn't be overthinking telling Sendai-san that I wanted to apply to the same university as Maika.

But the reality was, nothing happened between us.

I still had no idea what I'd do about my future. I didn't even know if I'd get accepted or not, and I kept thinking I could just figure it out if I did.

This place, though, held too many memories of Sendai-san, and it made me want to leave.

That was the only decision I wouldn't change.

Chapter 28

I Want to Learn More About Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 90

I had hugged Miyagi.

It happened only two weeks ago, not long at all, but the once vivid memory of holding her had quickly faded. The sensation of her in my arms had grown so faint, I could barely remember what it felt like. That day, she had been so quiet in my embrace, but it seemed like something like that would never happen again. Looking back, I should've committed that feeling to memory more deeply.

I wished I could store that memory neatly in a drawer alongside the shirt and blouse she gave me.

Thinking like that probably showed just how messed up I was.

I really hated it.

It was still early in the evening, and I was in the middle of my assignments when I let my pencil roll across the desk. It traveled over my notebook and stopped at my textbook.

Our midterms were over, but finals were quickly approaching, so I'd been spending more time at my desk. It felt like all I did lately was study, and honestly, that wasn't far from the truth. I had entrance exams to worry about too, which made everything even more exhausting.

I didn't hate studying, but I wanted the exams to be over already. But once they were done, graduation would be right around the corner, and then I'd have to face the end of the arrangement I had with Miyagi. Right now, I couldn't stand the thought of a future without her.

I absentmindedly touched the pendant Miyagi rarely asked about anymore. She still requested to see it sometimes, either ordering me to undo the third button of my blouse or doing it herself, but it happened less often these days. Instead, she'd been asking me to cook for her.

It wasn't like I wanted her to touch the pendant all the time or anything, but it made me uneasy when she didn't. The pendant felt like a cursed item, something I couldn't take off once I put it on, as if it had somehow bound itself to me. And because of this pendant, I kept having all sorts of strange thoughts.

I lightly patted my cheeks, trying to shake off the heavy mood. Glancing at the window, I noticed the rain outside had grown heavier, and the wind began to rattle the glass. The rain had started as a soft patter before I began studying, but now the wind howled along with it, creating an unsettling noise in the otherwise quiet room. I found myself wishing it would just turn to snow already.

Still sitting in my chair, I picked up my phone.

I wonder what Miyagi's doing right now?

Whenever Miyagi called me over, I never saw anyone else there. I had no idea what her parents did for a living or why they were never around, and I wasn't sure if Miyagi, who tended to get frightened easily, was afraid being alone on nights like this.

I opened my messaging app and tapped on Miyagi's name. After hesitating for a moment, I decided to call her.

It rang twice, then three times. By the sixth ring, just as I was about to hang up, her voice came through.

「… Sendai-san?」

「Yeah, it's me.」

「What do you want at this hour?」

I didn't really know how to answer. The truth was, I'd called without any particular reason in mind. But if I told her that, I had a feeling she'd get annoyed.

「Well, the weather's pretty bad outside, and I thought, since you get scared easily, maybe you were feeling a little freaked out.」

I said, trying to keep my excuse for calling her vague.

「I don't get scared that easily. What I don't like are gho- I mean, horror movies and stuff like that. The wind and rain are fine.」

「What about thunder?」

「I don't like it, but I'm not afraid of it.」

「Oh, I see.」

Miyagi seemed more afraid of ghosts than of the wind or rain, and she didn't sound scared at all on the other side of the phone. That should have been a relief, but now I didn't know what else to talk to her about.

'I just wanted to hear your voice.'

'I was a little worried about you.'

I wasn't going to say any of that, and it wasn't like I felt that way either. Or at least, I didn't think I did. Still, I didn't want to hang up now that we were talking.

「Are you alone at home right now?」

I tried to break the silence, knowing that Miyagi, with her short temper, would likely hang up on me if I didn't say something. But instead of a reply, there was quiet on her end. I realized that might not have been the best thing to ask. Miyagi rarely wanted to talk about herself, and whenever I tried, she'd always change the subject.

「… Yeah, I am.」

Just as I started regretting my question, she mumbled an answer.

「Are you always by yourself at this time of night?」

「Yeah, no one else is ever home.」

I'd already assumed as much, but hearing her say it herself was a first. It was unusual for her to be this open.

「Do both of your parents work or something?」

「Sendai-san, was there something you needed to talk to me about?」

Her voice dropped, as if hinting that she didn't want to talk about it any further. Sensing she wasn't going to respond to any more of my questions, I decided to answer hers honestly.

「Not really.」

The conversation ended abruptly, leaving only the sound of the rain and wind howling outside.

There were so many other things I wanted to ask Miyagi, but she always seemed irritated whenever I brought up university. If I asked her now, I felt like she'd hang up right away.

It felt unfair, like I was the only one making an effort, and the imbalance was starting to bother me.

But if I brought up something like that, she'd just steer the conversation towards whatever she wanted, and we'd end up in silence again. And if that silence lasted too long, she'd probably end up hanging up on me anyway.

I didn't want to be the one getting hung up on, so I decided I'd end the call myself.

「Anyway, I think we should hang up now.」

I was about to follow up with "Good night," but Miyagi cut me off before I could.

「Wait, Sendai-san, let's talk a little more. I'm not scared, but it's too loud outside.」

She said, as if making an excuse. Then, she quickly added, "Actually, never mind," but I stopped her.

「Wait, wait, don't take it back. Let's talk a bit more.」

「What do you want to talk about?」

「You don't have to answer if you don't want to, but is there a reason why you won't let me call you by your name, Miyagi?」

I asked a relatively harmless question that had always been on my mind.

「Only my friends call me "Shiori."」

I expected that response.

Miyagi and I weren't friends. I knew it was coming, but it still stung a little.

「If we became friends, could I call you by your name then?」

I followed up with another uninteresting question. But instead of answering it, Miyagi began her reply with, "Hazuki."

My heart skipped a beat hearing her say my name, something only a few people ever called me by. But her sentence didn't end there, and she tacked on a question of her own.

「—— Who calls you that? Just your friends?」

「Yeah, mostly my friends. Oh, and my parents too, I guess. You should call me by my name too, Miyagi.」

「I'm not your friend, and I'm definitely not your parent either.」

「Yeah, I figured you'd say that.」

Just like how people normally greeted each other with "Good morning" out of habit, Miyagi had her own set of phrases for moments like this. It was as if she had a set menu of responses, always ready to deny the idea of us being friends. I wasn't particularly hung up on whether we were friends or not, but hearing her deny it didn't exactly feel great either.

「Sendai-san, are you still wearing the necklace?」

This, too, had become one of her usual lines.

Miyagi always wanted to make sure I still had the pendant on.

「Yeah, I am.」

「Touch it, right now.」

「You want me to do it?」

Miyagi had always been the one to touch the pendant herself. She'd never asked me to touch it before, so I wanted to double-check with her.

「Yeah.」

「Okay, sure.」

I was so used to obeying her that I found myself doing what she asked without much thought. Even though now wasn't the time to be ordered around by her, I didn't see any reason to refuse, so I did as she asked.

I placed my hand over my hoodie, feeling the pendant beneath it.

「I touched it.」

I said, and Miyagi immediately replied with,

「Are you touching it directly? Not over your clothes?」

「Miyagi, did you install a camera in my room or something?」

「Of course not. But you're not doing it properly. Touch it directly.」

「Fine.」

I slipped my hand inside the neck of my loose-fitting hoodie and touched the chain of the pendant directly. Maybe because my room was warm, neither my hand nor the chain felt cold. I slowly ran my fingers along the chain, mimicking the way Miyagi always did it.

Ignoring the slight resistance at my fingertips, I followed the chain across my skin toward the charm. It didn't tickle, but it also didn't feel like I was the one doing it. Somehow, the sensation made me feel uneasy, and I let out shallow breaths.

「Are you touching it properly now?」

「I am.」

Hearing Miyagi's voice while I did this felt a little strange. Even though it was my own fingers, it almost felt like Miyagi was the one touching me. My breathing grew a little heavier, and the bumps on the chain felt more pronounced than usual.

「Really?」

Her voice through the phone seemed to caress my ear, echoing softly in my eardrum. It felt like I could hear Miyagi's breathing as well, so I tried to drown it out with the sound of my own voice.

「Do you want me to send you a video or something?」

「No, and you can stop touching it now.」

I stopped stroking the chain, but Miyagi quickly continued, cutting off any response I might have had.

「Sendai-san, I'm going to hang up now.」

「Okay. Good night.」

I said, and Miyagi responded with a quiet "Good night," her voice almost drowned out by the sound of wind and rain.

I Want to Learn More About Miyagi (II)

Part 91

I found myself dreaming about something I hadn't dreamt of in a while.

I felt a little unsettled.

I knew exactly why I had that dream again – it was because I had fallen asleep right after hearing Miyagi's voice.

I started having this dream after what happened on the last day of summer break, and it had come back to me a few times since the beginning of the second semester.

More precisely, the dream I had was of the last day of summer break itself. Sometimes, it would show what might've happened if things had gone further, but that wasn't the case today.

Either way, it wasn't a dream I wanted to have, especially not right before waking up.

After all, in the dream, I kissed my former classmate, lifted her T-shirt, and touched her bare skin. Then, she touched me too, and even though it was only over her undergarments, I felt her chest——

There was no way I could feel good about going to school after that.

I let out a sigh.

Just like how the sensation of hugging Miyagi had gradually faded, I didn't think I'd ever dream again about feelings I'd thought I'd forgotten.

It felt like part of me wanted to relive that day and take things even further. But even if I did, Miyagi would never let it happen again, so even with my sense of reason being as fragile as it was, I would never act on it —— probably not, anyway. So, all I

could do was feel depressed about it.

I picked up my phone, which doubled as my alarm clock, and checked the time. If I didn't start getting ready soon, I was going to be late for school, but I couldn't bring myself to get out of bed.

I really don't feel like going today.

For a second, I thought about skipping and going somewhere else, but quickly dismissed the idea. It would just cause problems if the school called home.

I heaved a sigh.

I turned on the air conditioner and reluctantly crawled out of bed.

「It's so cold.」

I ruffled my messy hair and forced myself to get ready. I brushed my teeth, changed into my uniform, and left the house without bothering to eat breakfast.

Ideally, I didn't want to run into Miyagi at school today, but it felt like on days like this, I'd end up seeing her, which made my steps feel heavier. But no matter how much I dreaded it, the more I walked, the closer I got to school, and before I knew it, I was walking through the gates and onto the school grounds.

I half-expected to bump into Miyagi on the way to my classroom, but luckily, that didn't happen. I managed to make it to my desk without incident. On days like this, I was glad we weren't in the same class.

As usual, I went over to Umina's desk, and we started chatting about clothes we wanted to buy or how the handsome actor from last night's TV drama was a disappointment, and so on.

When I was at school, it felt like I talked a lot more than I ever did when I was with Miyagi. I didn't care much for the TV dramas, but I did enjoy talking about clothes and accessories. While Umina and I didn't share the same fashion sense, I liked exchanging information about different stores with her, like when a new shop was about to open.

But today, I couldn't bring myself to enjoy it.

By the time two classes went by, I still felt sluggish.

I pulled out my gym clothes. I wasn't someone who got cold easily, but I really didn't like having gym class in the winter.

Just heading to the changing room was cold enough, and I knew the gym and field would be even worse. But skipping wasn't an option, so I left the classroom with Umina and the others, who seemed even more reluctant to go than I did.

We trudged down the cold hallway and entered the changing room. After storing my things in a locker, I slipped off my blazer.

Umina stood beside me, grumbling about gym class, and I nodded along to her complaints as I began to undo the buttons on my blouse.

「Hazuki, did you get that from someone?」

Umina asked right as I was about to take my blouse off. I knew immediately what she meant.

There was no doubt she was talking about the pendant I was wearing.

「What are you referring to?」

I asked, feigning ignorance.

Miyagi had ordered me not to let anyone else see the pendant, but I never had any intention of following that. Still, it felt like it'd be more trouble than it was worth if anyone ever saw it, so I had always made sure to keep it out of Umina's sight.

But now, Umina was staring at it like a curious child who'd just found something interesting.

Honestly, she could be such a pain sometimes.

I wasn't tired or sleep deprived, but thinking about that dream must've made me let my guard down.

「I'm talking about this thing.」

Umina said, reaching out toward the pendant.

I almost swatted her hand away but stopped myself. That would only raise suspicion and make things even more complicated.

「You got this from your boyfriend, didn't you?」

Umina asked as she traced the outline of the chain with her fingertips.

All hands felt more or less the same, and her warmth against the chain wasn't any different from when I touched it myself yesterday. But somehow, her touch felt strangely unfamiliar. I'd never thought about Umina's hands before, but right now, I didn't want her to touch me.

「I already told you, I don't have a boyfriend.」

I said casually, playfully slapping her hand away.

「Whaat?」

Umina replied, her tone exaggerated as she pulled her hand back. I quickly took off my blouse and changed into my gym clothes.

「Oh, come on, Hazuki. You've never worn anything like that to school before. Are you sure it wasn't a gift from your boyfriend?」

「Maybe if I had one, he'd give me something like this, but I don't.」

「Okay, then who gave it to you?」

「No one gave it to me. Back me up here, Mariko.」

I turned to Mariko, who was changing next to Umina, hoping she'd help me out.

「No way, I feel like you got it from someone too. You've

never worn anything like that before, so it's only natural to assume.」

I was about to argue, but Umina spoke up before I could.

「You thought so too, right, Mariko? Besides, wearing a pendant like that isn't even your thing, right, Hazuki?」

「Yeah. If I remember correctly, you said you liked accessories with shorter chains, didn't you?」

I realized asking Mariko for backup was a mistake. Now, I was backed into a corner. Everything they said was true, and the more I tried to explain, the worse it got. I usually didn't wear accessories to school, and I really did prefer something with a shorter chain. This pendant wasn't something I would've worn if it hadn't been from Miyagi.

「Now, tell us. Who gave it to you? Is he from our school?」

Umina asked, tugging on my gym uniform.

「Look, it's just a lucky charm.」

Unable to think of anything better, I went with a vague excuse.

「A lucky charm?」

Mariko asked, sounding skeptical.

「Yeah, a lucky charm for the entrance exams we've got this year. I figured something shorter would stand out too much, so I made the chain longer.」

「Well, okay, but who gave it to you?」

Umina pressed, a huge grin spreading across her face.

「No one gave it to me. I mean it.」

「Hazuki, your excuses are pretty weak today.」

Mariko said.

Umina chimed in with, “Come on, just make it easy on yourself and tell us already.”

「Look, we should get going or we’re going to be late.」

I was getting a bit frustrated. Without bothering to deny that I was trying to make excuses, I left the changing room. I heard Umina giggle and say, “Oh, she ran away,” behind me.

I didn’t dislike the two of them, but I wasn’t a fan of how everything seemed to circle back to boyfriends with them.

I touched the pendant over my gym uniform.

Why did Miyagi choose this pendant for me in the first place?

Was it because it was just the right length for her to touch when undoing the second button of my blouse? Or did she think it suited me?

「It’s freezing in the gym. I should’ve just ditched.」

Umina’s voice, saying something a teacher wouldn’t like, pulled me out of my thoughts, and I quickly let go of the pendant.

Our relationship was starting to come apart at the seams.

Traces of us were surfacing at school, and we were doing things we wouldn’t have done a year ago. I doubted anyone would figure it out before graduation, but still, I wasn’t sure what was going to happen to us before then.

I really wasn’t in the mood to see Miyagi today.

Especially after the kind of dream I had this morning—it left me feeling guilty, like I’d done something wrong. And thanks to Umina and Mariko’s probing, I was in a terrible mood.

But of course, it was always on days like this that Miyagi would reach out.

So, I wasn’t surprised at all to see an unread message from her after gym class.

I Want to Learn More About Miyagi (III)

Part 92

Miyagi's room was warmer than usual—almost too warm.

But that was better than the cold that had me shivering through gym class.

I unfastened the second button of my blouse, catching Miyagi's eyes on my fingers.

It was like she wanted me to undo one more but wouldn't say it aloud. Instead, she brought over the usual cups of barley tea and soda, setting them between the scattered reference books and workbooks on the table.

She hadn't given me any orders yet.

Lowering her gaze, Miyagi quietly returned to her homework.

She hadn't asked to see the pendant yet, which was a relief.

I didn't want her touching me today—not after the dream I'd had. But there was no reason for Miyagi to be concerned about this. It was my own issue to deal with and had nothing to do with her.

Pushing the dream aside, I turned the page of my reference book.

It doesn't matter. As long as I act like nothing happened, everything will be fine.

I took a sip of barley tea and picked up my pencil.

Instead of focusing on my reference book, I snuck a glance at Miyagi beside me, just as she said,

「Sendai-san, what if…」

She began to say something, then fell silent. No matter how

long I waited, she didn't continue, which left me feeling a bit uneasy. Since she was the one who brought it up, I didn't want to just leave it hanging. So, as if nudging her along, I repeated, "What if… what?"

She reluctantly continued with,

「This is just a "what if," okay?」

「Okay.」

「… If I applied to the same university as you, got accepted, and we ended up at the same school, what would you do?」

「Hmm, let me think…」

I propped my chin in my hands, mulling it over.

Miyagi didn't sound especially interested; she kept her head down, her hair falling over her cheeks and hiding her expression.

When I glanced at her notebook, I noticed some random scribbles, as if she'd been fidgeting restlessly.

「I guess I'd just ask if you wanted to eat together.」

It wasn't something I'd really thought about, so I answered with whatever came to mind first.

If we were to end up at the same university…

It was something I'd thought about before, but I'd never really considered what I'd actually want to do with Miyagi if it ever happened.

I couldn't imagine her suddenly becoming more honest with me just because we'd become university students, nor could I picture us hanging out or walking around town together. Honestly, it made more sense if she just kept her distance from me. No matter what I might want with her, it would never happen, and if all I could picture was her pushing me away, it was better not to think about it at all.

「What if I went to a nearby university instead?」

Although I wasn't sure how serious she was about it, Miyagi, who seemed to be considering applying to a school close to mine, looked up and said this in her typical indifferent tone.

「Uh, I guess I'd ask if you wanted to eat together?」

「Isn't this the same answer? Is that all you want to do?」

「Well, it's not like we could do much else together. I'd be fine with other things, but you'd just remind me that we're not friends, wouldn't you?」

I could pretty much guess how Miyagi would respond, and I figured that if I took the words straight out of her mouth, she'd be left without anything to say. And I was right. Miyagi fell silent.

I reached for her hand resting on the table. I didn't squeeze it, but Miyagi flinched slightly. Still, she didn't get mad at me.

This was just how she'd been lately.

She still wouldn't let me kiss her, but she'd let me touch her like this. Sometimes, she'd pull away, but most of the time, she'd let it slide, looking like she wanted to complain but never quite going through with it. I wanted to ask why she'd had this change of heart, but I knew she'd never answer.

I caressed her fingertips, slipping my fingers between hers. Feeling her hand in mine made me want to touch more than just her hands, and I wondered if she ever had the same dreams I did.

I held Miyagi's hand firmly, but she didn't hold mine back. Instead, she tried to pull away.

「I can't study like this, Sendai-san.」

「It's okay, me neither.」

I replied, still holding her hand, which earned me an annoyed look from her.

「There's nothing "okay" about this at all… Is this amusing to you?」

「Yeah, kind of.」

「Well, I have a hard time believing there's anything fun about holding my hand.」

I could understand where she was coming from. Not even I knew exactly why holding her hand amused me so much. But I couldn't help it—I just wanted to be able to touch Miyagi.

「I'm the one who gets to decide what's amusing to me. Besides, wouldn't it be scary if I were holding someone else's hand in this room right now? I bet you wouldn't be able to sleep after that.」

「Quit saying weird things.」

Miyagi frowned and slipped out of my grasp, grabbing a tissue box that had been sitting on the floor.

「Here, why don't you hold hands with this instead?」

She shoved the tissue box, decorated with a crocodile cover, toward me, and I ended up shaking hands with the crocodile I had no interest in holding. Its tiny, squishy hands were softer than hers, but lacked her warmth. It didn't feel unpleasant, but holding it wasn't exactly satisfying either.

The crocodile, which had been in her room much longer than I had, looked spotless, without a single mark or scratch. I'd seen it being handled pretty roughly before, yet somehow, it was still in perfect shape, as if it were something precious to her.

I wished she'd handle me with even half the care she gave that crocodile.

「Are you enjoying yourself?」

Miyagi asked as she watched me holding the crocodile.

「Hmm, not really.」

The crocodile in my hands looked far more sincere than its owner. I brushed my fingers over its nose before leaning down to

place a small kiss on it. It didn't have the warmth that Miyagi's lips did, and there was nothing exciting about it. I couldn't help but wish I were kissing Miyagi instead, as if I were still caught up in that dream from earlier.

「Don't do that.」

Even though she'd been the one to hand it to me in the first place, Miyagi pulled the crocodile away by its tail.

「Why not? Can't I at least kiss the crocodile?」

「No.」

「You're so cold, Miyagi. You didn't even show up when I called for you.」

Miyagi patted the head of the crocodile as I took another sip of barley tea. After what happened last time in the music preparation room — about a week ago — I had asked to see Miyagi again at school, but she hadn't shown up.

She didn't tell me why she hadn't come, but I could guess the reason.

Most likely, she was unhappy with how our trade had gone.

Miyagi was always overly cautious, so she was probably worried that if she saw me again, I'd try to push things further than just touching her.

「I already told you, didn't I? I'm not going to show up even if you ask to see me.」

Miyagi replied, sounding annoyed. This wasn't the first time we'd had this conversation, so I understood why she looked so fed up.

「You're right, but if you weren't going to show up, you should've let me know sooner.」

On the day Miyagi didn't show up to the music preparation room, she let me know within ten minutes that she wasn't coming. There wasn't any real reason for me to be complaining about it now,

and I hadn't expected her to show up in the first place. Still, for some reason, I felt the need to complain, and no matter how much I did, it still didn't feel like enough.

「I did let you know early. Besides, I don't want to make any more trades with you.」

Miyagi answered exactly as I'd expected.

「I don't think I even asked for anything unreasonable last time.」

「Sure, but you might ask for more next time.」

「No, I won't.」

I couldn't deny I had hidden motives, but I'd never do anything Miyagi truly disliked. Even if I said that aloud, though, I knew I wasn't trustworthy enough for her to believe me.

Even right now, I wanted to touch Miyagi more, to the point where I wanted to do something that might make her trust me even less. But if I did that, she wouldn't let me touch her at all anymore. All I could do was stroke the head of the crocodile in Miyagi's arms.

「… Okay, then what were you planning to do if I had shown up?」

Miyagi mumbled.

「Hmm, I hadn't thought about it. Let me see… I guess I would've had you call me by my name.」

I shared one of the little things I'd been wishing for, knowing how she'd respond.

「Call you by your name?」

「Yeah, I want you to call me "Hazuki."」

「I'm not going to do that.」

「Come on, at least say it once.」

I'd expected her to refuse outright, even though I'd only asked her to say it once. Still, I figured there was no harm in asking, so I looked at Miyagi, not expecting much. She met my gaze briefly before looking away, her head dipping down. Then, she muttered,

「… I'm not going to call you Hazuki.」

Well, I guess that technically counts.

It might've just barely made the cut, but I could consider it her calling me by my name.

My mood, which had been close to rock bottom earlier, had lifted quite a bit. I gently pulled her hand away from the crocodile she was holding and held it, and this time, she gently squeezed back.

Volume 3 Extra

It Wouldn't Suit Sendai-san

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 92-extra

I'd really thought it would suit Sendai-san at the time, but now that some time had passed, I wasn't so sure. The necklace I'd seen that day at the mall while picking up materials for the cultural festival had somehow gotten lodged in my mind ever since, refusing to go away. And yet, I still couldn't picture Sendai-san actually wearing it.

Sitting alone in my room, I leaned my head against the table, where my homework lay scattered. All I wanted was to stop thinking about that necklace. For something so trivial, it was absurdly persistent, taking up space in my mind like it had a right to be there. Normally, I'd forget something like this easily, but it kept creeping back while I was studying or just before bed, like some annoying zombie I couldn't shake off.

□□ A necklace with a small charm hanging from a silver chain.

I'd noticed it while running errands, carrying bags of supplies through the mall. Or rather, it practically jumped out at me. It had been on display in a little store I'd usually pass without a second glance, but that day was different—I found myself stopping in front of a shop I'd normally ignore.

I wouldn't go as far as calling it a "fateful encounter," but I couldn't look away from that necklace, with its crescent moon charm. It made me think of Sendai-san.

"This would really suit her," I'd thought, and that silly notion kept coming back to me over and over.

Before I knew it, the school festival had come and gone, and I wasn't even sure if the necklace was still in the store. But the image

of it kept replaying in my mind, refusing to disappear.

There was probably only one way to finally get rid of it: if I could be sure it was sold out. If it wasn't in stock, I couldn't buy it anyway—then maybe I'd be able to put it out of my mind for good.

I lifted my head, closed the textbook in front of me, and picked up my phone from the table.

It hadn't even been an hour since I'd started my homework.

If I go now, I can still make it.

The shopping mall was still open.

Since I hadn't invited Sendai-san over today, I had some time to spare, and I'd still have enough time to finish my homework when I got back. Everything seemed to line up perfectly for me to check whether the necklace was still in stock.

The necklace is definitely gone by now.

It had been a while since I'd ran those errands for the cultural festival. There was no way it was still for sale. Normally, going to check would be a complete waste of time, but to me, it was important I confirmed it.

It was better than letting my mind get consumed by thoughts of something that might not even be there anymore. I'd feel a bit more at ease knowing it was gone. And if, by some chance, it was still there, I could decide what to do then. Either way, it was better than obsessing over something I saw before the cultural festival—a thought that still lingered long after it was over.

I opened the curtains and saw that it was already starting to get dark outside, so I put on a cardigan.

Just in case something were to happen, I slipped my wallet into my bag before leaving the apartment.

Even though it was rather late to head to the mall, I still walked slowly. There was no need to hurry. All I had to do was confirm it was sold out. I didn't need to buy the necklace, and I didn't have to give it to Sendai-san either, so there was no reason to

rush.

I walked through the dimly lit city, entered the mall as I had back when I ran errands for the cultural festival, and made my way to the store where the necklace was. Step by step, I walked at an unusually slow pace until I reached the shop.

「… There's no way.」

The necklace was supposed to be sold out.

I shouldn't have been able to buy it, and yet, there it was.

I was at a complete loss for words.

What should I do?

There was no reason for me to hesitate, and yet, I still found myself wavering. I had enough money in my wallet to buy it. If only I didn't—then I could've given up peacefully. But seeing it here made me feel like it was something I could buy, and the reason for that was simple: if I went home empty-handed, I'd only end up spending my days obsessing over it again.

Well, it's not as if things like this happen all the time.

This would probably be the first and last time I'd buy something for Sendai-san to wear. It wouldn't happen again—or at least, I felt like I could let myself off the hook if I told myself that.

Besides, even if I bought it, giving it to her was a whole different matter.

Just because I buy something doesn't mean I have to give it away. I could just wear it myself if I wanted.

I reached for the necklace, then quickly drew my hand back.

I let out a sigh.

I wasn't trying to buy it just because I thought it would look good on her.

When it came to Sendai-san, anything would look good on

her. She could make even the cheapest accessories seem stylish. She could even make things that looked dull on me look nice on her.

If I were to give her anything, it wouldn't matter what design it had.

The only reason I wanted to buy this was to make our relationship clear.

Sendai-san had been getting ahead of herself lately.

She'd called me out at school and kissed me.

She didn't seem like she was even trying to follow the rules anymore.

In fact, it was quite the opposite. She was acting like breaking the rules was completely normal now. What happened over summer break may have blurred our boundaries, but that was over a month ago. It was about time things got back on track already.

With this necklace, I could bind Sendai-san and make it clear who was in control. She needed to be reminded that it cost five thousand yen to spend time together.

A necklace was perfect for that, a physical reminder she could wear every day.

It wouldn't leave a lasting mark like a piercing, but it would still tie her down until graduation. And once I bought it, I could finally stop obsessing over this necklace.

I picked up the silver chain with the small charm hanging from it.

The shop was filled with cute, pretty trinkets, making it awkward for me to head to the register.

I almost wished Maika or Ami were here with me, but if they saw me buying something I normally wouldn't wear, they'd only get curious and start asking too many questions.

It's okay.

As long as I paid for it, I had the right to buy it. It was no different than buying instant noodles. With that thought in mind, I forced myself to the register, clutching the necklace. I wanted to leave quickly, but I was slowed down by a trivial question, like how I wanted it wrapped. This wasn't even supposed to be a gift, but since I was giving it to her, I had no choice but to treat it like one. I picked out a ribbon and wrapping paper, then paid for it.

Leaving the store, I exited the mall and made my way back out into the city.

I walked down the streets slowly.

I hadn't noticed how chilly it was when it was bright out, but it was definitely cold now.

Summer was long gone, and we were in the middle of autumn.

During the day, it felt like traces of summer remained, but by night, there was no hint of it left. The seasons kept moving—after summer came autumn, then winter, and after that, spring would arrive with graduation. Autumn couldn't last forever.

I slowed my pace even more.

The item in the small box I'd bought was only meant to tie us together until graduation. Nothing more, nothing less.

When graduation arrived, we'd go our separate ways, never to meet again.

That was to be expected, given we'd be attending different universities. Our days wouldn't overlap anymore, and our connection and memories together would gradually fade away.

That was only natural, and I felt like that was how things should be.

We were about to head off to university soon. Of course, I'd keep studying hard until then, but no amount of effort would land me at the same university as Sendai-san. Not that I'd ever expected that in the first place.

I didn't want to put any labels on my memories with her, nor

was I going to change my future plans.

The necklace would simply serve as a reminder for what the five-thousand-yen was for.

That felt right for us.

But even if I'd found a reason to buy it, I still didn't have a reason to actually give it to her.

Sendai-san had been coming over since July of our second year, and now, with our third-year cultural festival behind us, I still didn't even know her birthday—something I could've used as an excuse to give the necklace to her.

I walked, each step deliberate and slow. My bag felt heavy, even though there was nothing actually weighing it down.

I shouldn't have bought it.

A sigh almost escaped me as I gently rocked the light yet heavy bag in my hands.

Chapter 29

It's Not A Request, Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 93

My scores on my final exams were better than I'd expected.

But Sendai-san hadn't asked to see them.

Not that I wanted her to or anything, but considering how much we'd been studying together, it felt a little anticlimactic. On the other hand, it'd feel weird if I went out of my way to tell her about my results.

Still, it seemed strange—she'd been so eager to talk about university, yet didn't seem to care much about my grades. I felt justified in finding that odd, but I couldn't exactly just bring it up with Sendai-san either.

I put away the test papers scattered across my desk and turned up the heat on the air conditioner.

I'm probably just overthinking all this.

That was most likely it. I was probably the only one who found it strange that she hadn't asked about my test results. Normally, it wasn't something worth mentioning, anyway.

To Sendai-san, my finals scores probably didn't matter, which was why, when she'd been here today, all she did was study without bringing it up. I should just think of it that way.

I picked up my mini calendar.

We were already on the last page—December. Half the month had slipped by in the blink of an eye. Only two weeks remained in the year, most of which would be during winter break.

I let out a small sigh and put the calendar back down.

It was sunny today, with no sign of rain.

Outside, it was quiet, and the only sounds inside my room were the small noises I made as I moved around.

I was used to being alone at home.

Just as I'd gotten used to having Sendai-san here with me.

Taking out my phone, I lay down on my bed. Winter break was almost here, with Christmas coming even sooner. The streets were already decorated with colorful lights, and everyone at school seemed to be in a cheerful mood. Ami kept going on about how excited she was to spend Christmas with her boyfriend, so much so that she seemed to forget all about the entrance exams coming up.

I couldn't say I shared her enthusiasm.

I did have plans to spend Christmas with Maika again this year, just like last year, but that was it. We weren't even planning to exchange presents.

Hanging out with Maika was always fun, and I was looking forward to it, though not as much as I had last year. I knew why, too.

It was because, other than that, I had no plans at all for the break.

As usual, my father wouldn't be home much, and I had no plans to see Sendai-san either, so my schedule was completely open —unlike summer vacation.

I stared down at the screen of my phone.

Sendai-san hadn't called me once since that night.

I knew it was normal for her not to call, yet I couldn't help but wonder if my phone would ring again the next time it rained.

「—— Hazuki.」

I murmured her name softly under my breath.

Even if I were to get into the same school as Maika, I wouldn't be able to see Sendai-san as often as I did now. Once graduation passed, I'd lose the right to give her orders.

I could find excuses to see her, but it wouldn't be the same as it was now, where we could meet whenever we wanted.

For now, seeing each other was easy, and we at least had a reason to—even during winter break.

Sendai-san and I didn't have the kind of relationship where we'd make plans for Christmas, but studying together over the break felt reasonable—just as we'd done over summer vacation. The rule about not meeting outside of school days didn't mean much anymore. We'd broken it in the summer, so there was no reason to follow it over winter break.

Even with the entrance exams looming and winter break being so short, I was sure we could still find time to meet up at least once or twice. After all, considering how long summer break had been, this much seemed fair.

But Sendai-san never brought it up.

Even with winter break around the corner, she hadn't offered to tutor me or suggested we meet up. She would hug me or hold my hand at random and say the strangest things, yet she never mentioned the one thing I expected to hear from her the most.

I reached over the edge of my bed and pulled up the tissue box with the crocodile cover from the floor. I gently ran my fingers over its body, squeezing its hand. The soft fabric felt weak, nothing like the warmth of a human hand. It didn't move, nor did it return my squeeze.

Of course it didn't, but still, I couldn't shake the feeling of disappointment.

This wasn't Sendai-san. I knew that. Yet, I couldn't stop myself from stroking its nose and giving it a quick peck.

I sighed, petting the crocodile one last time before setting it

back on the floor.

It was just a tissue box cover—nothing more. No matter how many times I squeezed its hand or kissed it, it would never become anything else. But thanks to Sendai-san, it was starting to mean something else, and I couldn't help but sigh again.

What if…

What if I were the one to ask Sendai-san to help me study over winter break? Would she say yes and tutor me just like she did over summer vacation?

To be honest, I felt like it should be her offering. After all, she was the one pushing me to apply to the same university as her, so at the very least, she owed me that much. Plus, this desire to see her, to be close to her, all of it—this was her fault. She should be the one to take responsibility for it.

I crawled into my bed.

I tapped through a few screens, and soon, Sendai-san's name appeared on my phone.

If I kept hesitating like this, I'd be left with nothing to do over winter break.

Although I no longer felt bound by our rules, I doubted Sendai-san would just agree if I asked her to tutor me. I had a feeling she'd refuse, even if I offered to pay her for it.

The five-thousand-yen I'd been paying her was starting to lose its effectiveness.

Maybe I'd have better luck if I offered her a trade instead.

「Ugh, this is such a pain.」

I muttered aloud, letting the words spill out along with all the thoughts jumbled in my head.

There was no reason to call her right now. It wasn't like we had anything to talk about either.

Besides, there was still a bit of time before the start of winter break.

There was no need to panic.

I set my phone down next to my pillow.

It's Not A Request, Sendai-san (II)

Part 94

As long as it was a school day, I could call for Sendai-san whenever I wanted—whether I had a reason to or not. Until recently, I'd only ask her over on days when I was feeling down, but now I'd started inviting her simply because I felt like it.

Today was one of those days.

Still, instead of the 24th or 25th, I chose the 23rd, the last day of the semester, to have her over. Knowing her, she'd likely have plans around Christmas, and I also had plans to hang out with Maika. Besides, I felt it was best to avoid dates that were too memorable.

I wasn't sure what Sendai-san thought of all this, though.

I came back to my room with cups of black tea and snacks for both of us. Sendai-san was lounging there as usual, with two buttons of her blouse undone. After setting down the tray on the table between us and taking my seat, Sendai-san pointed to one of the small square treats.

「What's this?」

「It's a fudge square.」

「Fudge?」

「It's some kind of English dessert. My father was the one who brought it home.」

「How does it taste?」

It seemed to be her first time seeing fudge, so instead of tasting it, she just stared at the small block, studying it closely.

「I mean, it's basically just butter and sugar mixed with milk.」

「Uh, isn't that insanely high in calories?」

「Yeah, probably. I had some yesterday, and it was unbelievably sweet.」

The brown square looked like a chunk of caramel, but once it touched your tongue, it crumbled into something at least ten times sweeter. It wasn't just sugary; the rich milk flavor made you want to go for more.

「Oh, so that's why you brought us black tea.」

「Did you want barley tea instead?」

「No, anything non-carbonated is fine. I'm just surprised—it's rare to see you drink anything that isn't soda.」

Sendai-san said as she picked up a piece of fudge.

「It's also rare for you to bring out snacks for us. Is this supposed to be an early Christmas celebration?」

「No. I just figured, since it was something I had at home already, it wouldn't hurt to serve it.」

「I see.」

I thought she might tease me, but instead, Sendai-san put the fudge square in her mouth, chewing it slowly before swallowing. She raised her eyebrows, saying,

「It's good, but I feel like it's something you shouldn't eat too much of.」

She sipped her tea carefully, then put the cup—about a third empty—back down. She reached for another piece of fudge but paused, her hand returning to her teacup.

「Sendai-san, open your mouth.」

I said, holding a piece of fudge up in front of her.

「Is that an order?」

「Yep.」

After I confirmed that it was an order, Sendai-san opened her mouth reluctantly. I brought the treat closer, pressing it lightly to her lips, feeling the soft warmth of them brush against my fingertips. I'd touched her skin plenty of times before, usually while feeling the necklace around her neck, but her lips had a softness that was different, more delicate.

For a moment, I lingered, wanting to savor that gentle softness —but I quickly snapped out of it, pushing the sweet treat into Sendai-san's mouth.

「It's so sweet.」

She murmured as she chewed, echoing what I'd said the day before. Once she'd swallowed it, I picked up another piece and held it to her lips.

「Have this one too.」

Sendai-san opened her mouth obediently, and I pushed the caramel-colored treat inside, letting my fingers graze her lips a bit more than before. This time, as her lips closed around the candy, I didn't pull away immediately, lingering a bit longer than necessary, causing her to take hold of my wrist.

「You should have some too, Miyagi.」

She said, letting go of my wrist before even finishing the treat. She reached over for another piece, but before she could grab one, I snatched one up myself.

「I'll eat it myself.」

I didn't really feel like eating any more fudge, especially after the pieces I had yesterday and the three I'd already eaten before Sendai-san got here. Really, I'd only brought them out for her to try —not that I'd ever mention that to her.

Even if I told her I wasn't in the mood for more, she'd probably find a way to make me eat it anyway. So, instead, I just popped the treat into my mouth.

「It really is sweet.」

I muttered, repeating the same words she'd said earlier, before taking a sip of my tea. Then, Sendai-san quietly asked,

「Hey, Miyagi… Are you hanging out with Utsunomiya on Christmas?」

「Yeah, I am. Do you have plans with Ibaraki-san?」

「Umina's going on a date with someone, so I'll be spending it with another friend.」

「Oh, I see.」

Unable to think of anything else, I gave a reply that left little room to continue the conversation. Sendai-san slid her teacup toward the edge of the table to make space for her textbooks, making it clear that there was nothing more to talk about. I couldn't bring myself to say anything either.

She must have realized, as I did, that after today, we wouldn't have any chances to see each other until after winter break. But she never brought it up.

Back before summer vacation, she'd kept talking about it, asking how I'd spend my time off. Seeing her so quiet about it now felt almost unnatural.

The only sounds beside me were the quiet flipping of textbook pages and the scratching of her pencil on paper. I took another sip of tea. She hadn't offered to tutor me over winter break, and it didn't seem like she planned to bring it up now, either.

I stood and moved to sit on my bed, unsure if I could say what I wanted to if I were sitting face-to-face with her.

「… What are you planning to do over winter break, Sendai-san?」

I asked, my voice softer than I'd intended.

「Study.」

Sendai-san replied, without turning around, as if the answer were obvious.

It was exactly what I expected.

With entrance exams coming up, there wasn't much time to relax, and if she had extra time for tutoring, she should be using it to study for her own exams instead. It made sense, but I couldn't bring myself to let the conversation end there.

「Are you planning on doing anything else?」

「Not really. Though I'll at least go to a shrine with Umina on New Year's Day.」

She mentioned a name I didn't want to hear in her winter plans.

—— What, so you're willing to make time to see Ibaraki-san?

If she had that kind of free time on her hands, she should make time to see me, too.

「Sendai-san, come sit next to me.」

「Next to you?」

Sendai-san asked as she turned around.

「Yeah, that's what I said. Were you not listening?」

「I was, but that came out of nowhere and had nothing to do with what we were just talking about. But anyway, is that supposed to be an order?」

「It is.」

I replied firmly, and with a resigned look, Sendai-san got up and sat next to me.

The bed creaked slightly as she settled beside me, and I felt my heart skip a beat, her warmth now closer than before.

「Okay, now what?」

「Close your eyes.」

「Why?」

Sendai-san stared at me, completely disregarding what I'd just asked of her.

「Fine, you don't have to if you don't want to.」

「Stop giving me these vague instructions and tell me what it is you actually want.」

「What are you talking about?」

「If you're asking me to close my eyes because you want to kiss me, then just say it.」

How frustrating.

There were no other words for how I felt.

Sendai-san wasn't wrong—I had asked her to close her eyes so I could kiss her. But the way she put it made it sound like I was the one desperate for it.

That wasn't it at all.

The kiss I was about to give her wasn't because I wanted it—it was because Sendai-san was always trying to kiss me. So, she had the wrong idea.

「Miyagi, you want to kiss me, don't you?」

Sendai-san said firmly, noticing my silence and taking my hand.

「That's not it, but… just close your eyes anyway.」

I needed to kiss her today.

There'd be no point in doing it after winter break.

I squeezed her hand in return, then gently gripped her blouse. Instead of giving her any more orders, I slowly pulled her closer, and she closed her eyes.

As I moved toward her, I felt as nervous as if this were our first kiss. In fact, my heart was probably beating three times faster than usual.

I wanted to stare at Sendai-san a bit longer before having to close my own eyes.

She really was beautiful whenever she stayed quiet. Her eyebrows were neatly shaped, her lashes not long but longer than mine, and her lips, which she'd always use to make fun of me with, were smooth and soft. Her eyes were prettier open than closed, but it'd be awkward for me if she were to open them now.

I leaned in and pressed my lips to hers. They felt softer and warmer than when I touched them with my fingertips—soft to the point where just touching them felt good.

I wanted to be with her a bit longer. But I knew I couldn't keep clinging to her, so I pulled away and buried my face in her shoulder.

「… Come tutor me over winter break.」

I couldn't bring myself to say it too loudly, but I managed to get the words out. I didn't think my kisses were worth much, but Sendai-san seemed eager to kiss me all the time, so I figured it made for a decent trade.

「We're not supposed to meet outside of school days, remember?」

Her voice was close to my ear, but her response wasn't what I expected.

「You're always breaking the rules, aren't you, Sendai-san?」

「Does that mean you want to break them as well, Miyagi?」

Sendai-san tugged lightly at my hair.

「No, that's not what I meant.」

「Does that mean you were just making a request from me, then?」

「No.」

「Okay, then, if that kiss wasn't meant to be an order, and you weren't asking me for a favor, does that mean you want to make a trade with me?」

I didn't like this side of her. Even though she knew exactly what I was getting at, she still went out of her way to ask these pointless questions.

「It's fine if you don't want to.」

「I never said that, but if you're trying to make a trade, you're going to have to give me a more proper kiss than that.」

Sendai-san said as she hugged me, my forehead pressing firmly against her shoulder.

Chapter 30

What Miyagi Will Let Me Get Away With (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 95

To be honest, this seemed too good to be real.

I hadn't expected things to come this far.

I gently ran my fingers through Miyagi's hair as she stayed nestled in my arms.

The sweet scent of her shampoo made the already warm room feel even hotter.

「I kissed you properly, didn't I?」

Miyagi spoke softly, tugging at my blouse. As I loosened our embrace, she looked up at me, her head still tucked into my shoulder.

It seemed only right for Miyagi to be the one to say she wanted to see me over winter break, but I never imagined she'd offer me a kiss in exchange for tutoring her. At most, I thought she'd ask me, with her usual deadpan expression, to help her study over winter break. That was about all I'd expected from her.

「I wouldn't call that a proper kiss.」

I shrugged off Miyagi's words, pulling away slightly.

「Then what is?」

「If you're not sure what counts as a proper kiss, why don't I show you?」

I traced her lips with my fingertips, gently pressing my thumb

into her mouth. My fingers just barely touched her teeth, and Miyagi reacted by pushing me away by the shoulders. As I pulled back, she seemed to understand my point and frowned.

「… Just so we're clear – this is all part of the trade, right?」

She asked, as if to double-check.

It always felt like I was the one putting in all the effort, leaning toward Miyagi.

Sometimes, I wondered if I should take a step back to sort out my own feelings. But I realized I was wrong. If things were already so unbalanced, why not let them tip even further? If I could get Miyagi to lean toward me just as much—or even more—then who cared about "balance" anyway?

「Yeah, it is.」

I replied curtly, and Miyagi sighed softly before taking hold of my arm. She moved her face closer, but when she noticed I hadn't closed my eyes, she shot me a sharp look, silently urging me to close them.

Not wanting to risk making her angry, I shut my eyes, and soon, something soft brushed against my lips, and the grip on my arm tightened.

After a moment, Miyagi's tongue hesitantly entered my mouth, grazing mine gently. It tasted sweet, like the snack I'd been eating earlier—or maybe that sweetness was just in my imagination, and I was the only one who tasted it.

I'd never thought I'd see the day where Miyagi would ever kiss me like this without a single complaint, nor did I think she'd actually agree to do more than she originally offered. All of this was messing with my emotions.

I extended my tongue a little further, letting it gently brush against hers.

I wanted to feel even more of her.

But before anything could happen, Miyagi pulled away, as if

retreating.

「Was that good enough?」

Miyagi asked, her eyes avoiding mine.

Honestly, I didn't think it was bad.

Miyagi had kissed me earnestly, and she usually didn't enjoy kissing with tongue unless she could bite me too. Given all that, I figured I could let her off the hook this time.

Yet, I didn't want it to end here.

「Hmm, I don't think so.」

It felt like today, I could get away with a little more.

「But I did exactly as you asked.」

「Maybe, but I still wouldn't call that a proper kiss.」

I knew I was just nitpicking and making up excuses.

Miyagi frowned, clearly unhappy, and I couldn't blame her for it.

「That's just based on your standards, isn't it?」

「If it's something you're offering to me, shouldn't it meet my standards?」

「… I guess so.」

Normally, Miyagi would complain that I was being unfair or adding extra conditions, but today, she seemed uncharacteristically compliant.

"Come tutor me over winter break."

It seemed like she was holding back from arguing, as if afraid that even the smallest pushback might ruin the chances of it happening.

「You're fine with this, right?」

I wasn't going to give her a chance to object. Before she could answer, I pressed my lips against hers, pulling her closer by wrapping an arm around her waist. Her lips, usually pressed firmly shut, were slightly parted, allowing me to enter her mouth with barely any resistance. She didn't bite down on my tongue, and everything seemed to be going smoothly.

Honestly, her first kiss would have been enough to fulfill the trade, but since she was giving me the chance to go further, I couldn't help but take it.

I entwined my tongue with hers, gently guiding her. This time, Miyagi didn't pull away; instead, she matched my movements. Her tongue was soft, elastic, and—just as I'd imagined—sweet. When I drew my tongue back a little, Miyagi followed, and I bit down on her tongue, even more gently than I'd bitten into the fudge square earlier.

Our lips felt almost unbearably hot, as if they might melt together. It was almost as if I'd forgotten how to breathe, and dizziness started to cloud my mind.

I pulled away from Miyagi, then pushed her down onto the bed. I was surprised at how easily she sank back, her body yielding to me.

I leaned in again, closing my eyes, and kissed her deeply once more.

Perhaps Miyagi was still taking this "proper kiss" thing seriously, because when I slid my tongue into her mouth, she responded. Our tongues met and parted, over and over, and soon our breathing became more ragged.

I started undoing the buttons of Miyagi's blazer and loosened her necktie, only to be shoved away. I expected her to say something, but instead, she simply met my gaze in silence. It wasn't until I had unfastened all the buttons on her blouse and was caressing her side that she finally spoke up.

「This is going way beyond kissing now.」

Miyagi said, trying to steady her breathing, as she grabbed my hand, which had been resting at her side.

「Since you didn't kiss me properly the first time, I thought it was only fair to include this as part of the deal.」

「Stop deciding things on your own.」

She muttered, pulling my hand away from her side.

But today, I had a few magic words to get her to listen to me.

「You want me to come tutor you over winter break, don't you?」

I whispered in her ear as she started buttoning up her blouse. She paused, and when I slid my hand back to her side, this time she didn't pull away.

This little spell I had just for today was proving very effective.

「… Adding all these extra conditions isn't fair.」

「You've done it before yourself, haven't you, Miyagi?」

「Maybe, but you're asking for too much.」

「You're right. I am pushing things a bit too far.」

Miyagi's voice sounded displeased, but she hadn't bit or kicked me, so I was pretty sure she wasn't truly against it. If she really wanted me to back off, she'd make it clear.

So even though I knew I was overstepping, I couldn't bring myself to stop.

「I'll stop if you really hate this—just say the word. So, what's it going to be? How far are you willing to let me go today?」

During summer break, she had let me push just a little further than this. So, what about now? I slowly slid my hand down her side. As my fingers trailed over her ribs, feeling each one, Miyagi's body gave a slight tremor. She reached out and gripped my shoulder, as if trying to cover herself up, but her hold was so gentle, I knew she

wasn't actually stopping me.

I looked at Miyagi, her cheeks faintly flushed. I wanted to kiss her, but I worried that might cause her to change her mind about all this, so I held back.

This was different from what had happened over the summer, when we'd simply gotten carried away in the moment. Now, with this impure trade-off between us, we couldn't just lose ourselves; it felt like we were both searching for some kind of middle ground.

Without intending to, I touched her slowly, gently, as though looking for something on her body. My fingertips moved along her soft, smooth skin and paused just shy of her chest. I let out a breath.

When I finally rested my hand on her chest, over her undergarments, Miyagi's body trembled again. But that was all—she hadn't told me to stop.

My heart was pounding so loudly, I could barely hear my own thoughts.

My palms felt hot, almost feverish.

Miyagi didn't grab my hand or try to stop me, so I undid the clasp of her bra and gently moved it aside. As her chest slowly came into view, her body tensed.

I wanted to see her expression, to know what she was feeling, but I couldn't bring myself to look, afraid it might make her reconsider what we were doing. I eased her bra away, revealing her small, delicately shaped breasts.

I'd seen other girls' chests before—at hot springs or during school trips—but I'd never thought anything of them.

But right now, it was different.

I wanted to touch Miyagi's chest.

I wanted it more than anything.

I moved my hands closer, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath my fingertips—at least, I think I did. But before I could

fully take in the sensation, Miyagi pulled me toward her, wrapping me in an embrace.

I lost my balance, and instead of touching her chest, I had to brace myself by placing my hands on the bed. With Miyagi pressed so closely against me, there was barely any space between us, and it was hard to move.

This room was always unbearably warm, and today was no exception—I had already taken off my blazer. I could feel Miyagi's warmth and the sensation of her body through my blouse, but even that thin fabric was starting to feel like an obstacle. If only we weren't wearing any clothes—then I could feel her so much more clearly.

Wanting to feel her more directly, I poked her sides. Suddenly, something warm pressed against my neck, and a moment later, a sharp pain sank into it.

「Ouch.」

I didn't need to look—I knew it was her teeth. Miyagi was biting me hard, and the sting was proof she wasn't holding back.

「Hey, Miyagi, if you bite too hard, you'll leave a mark.」

I lightly tapped her side, and finally, she let go.

「You're an erotic demon, Sendai-san. A lecher. A total pervert.」

「Wh— An erotic demon?」

「What, are you saying you're not? I never said you could look at me or touch me like that.」

She punctuated her words by digging her nails into my back.

「Ouch, that actually hurts.」

「You deserve it, Sendai-san. I'm never going to forgive you for today.」

「But—」

I wanted to say, “You didn’t resist,” but I knew that would only make her even angrier.

「But what?」

「Uh, nothing. I won’t do anything else, so… could you let go?」

「… Really?」

「Really. I swear I won’t.」

As I promised, her arms loosened around me, giving me back my freedom to move. I pulled back a bit, my gaze naturally drifting down to her chest, but before I could get much of a look, Miyagi’s hands blocked my vision.

「Don’t look over here. Keep your eyes closed for once.」

Miyagi said in a sulky voice, her hands covering my eyes.

「Okay, they’re closed.」

I did as I was told, and she quickly pulled her hands away.

「Now turn around.」

I had a feeling that if I opened my eyes now, I’d get kicked out of the room, so I sat up, turned around, and kept my eyes shut. I couldn’t see what Miyagi was doing, but I could tell she was getting dressed again.

「Are you done yet?」

I waited for about three minutes before asking.

「No. Just stay like that for the rest of your life.」

She replied, her voice cold and annoyed. Then she hit me in the back with what felt like a pillow.

「You’re not going to tell me that wasn’t good enough again, are you? You’d better keep your promise.」

Miyagi said, her tone the sulkiest it had been all day.

What Miyagi Will Let Me Get Away With (II)

Part 96

My neck stung where Miyagi had bitten me.

I was pretty sure she'd left a mark.

But that wasn't what was on my mind. Instead, the sweetness of her tongue and the beauty of her bare chest stayed with me, vivid and persistent.

I wanted to kiss her more. I wanted to touch her more. But I knew that if I voiced those thoughts, she'd do more than just bite me next time.

「I'll keep my end of the deal. Feel free to ask me over anytime during the break. I still have prep school, so I might not always be free, but I'll help you study whenever I can. So, uh… can I turn around now?」

I made sure to keep my words safe and careful. For now, I followed Miyagi's orders and stayed facing away from her.

「No, absolutely not. Stay that way forever and don't speak again for the rest of your life.」

Miyagi's voice had a childish tone, perfectly matching the childish words she was saying.

「But there's something I need to check.」

「No, you don't.」

I heard her sharp voice from behind me.

From her tone, it was clear she wasn't in the mood to hear me out. Still, I couldn't keep my back to her forever, so I had to come up with a reason she'd easily accept.

「Miyagi, you bit me really hard. I think you left a mark. Can you check for me?」

「No.」

「If you don't, I'll tell everyone at school that you bit me.」

「… Where is it?」

The mention of "school" seemed to strike a nerve, and she asked reluctantly.

「Here.」

I turned to face Miyagi quietly and pointed to the spot where she'd bitten me. She leaned in a little closer, then let out a soft, "Ah."

「What do you mean, ah?」

「There really is a mark.」

She admitted, her tone slightly gloomy, though she didn't look particularly apologetic.

「Yeah, I figured.」

「It'll probably fade quickly, and even if it doesn't, it won't show as long as you keep yourself buttoned up.」

Miyagi muttered as she hastily buttoned my blouse all the way up.

「Uh, I feel like it's still visible.」

The spot she'd bitten wasn't exactly hidden, even with my blouse fully buttoned.

「It'll be gone by tomorrow morning.」

She said with a sigh, clearly trying to dismiss the issue.

I unbuttoned the top two buttons she'd just fastened for me.

Her room wasn't particularly warm, but being buttoned up to the neck made me feel oddly uneasy. Besides, it wasn't like being buttoned up would actually help, and I didn't mind if the mark was visible to Miyagi.

「I'm okay with you biting me, but try not to leave any marks next time.」

「Well, it was your fault, Sendai-san.」

She replied, still refusing to meet my eyes.

「Yeah, I guess you're right about that.」

No matter how I looked at it, the fault was entirely mine.

I didn't think it was unfair for Miyagi to blame me, and I could understand why she didn't want to face me right now.

But trying to study under this heavy, awkward atmosphere felt unsettling. It was even more uncomfortable than the tension we'd had after summer break. My own impure feelings made it worse, thickening the air around us.

「Oh, right. There's something I wanted to give you, Miyagi.」

Unable to bear the stagnant silence any longer, I stood up.

I wasn't making it up—I really did have something for her.

Reaching into my bag, I pulled out a package that was too large for one hand but manageable with both and handed it to Miyagi, who was still sitting on her bed.

「It's a bit early, but… here. Take this.」

「… What is this supposed to be?」

「I think you can figure it out just by looking at it.」

The bag was wrapped in red and green with a red ribbon tied neatly on top. Considering the time of year, it wasn't hard to guess its purpose. Even Miyagi should be able to tell.

「Is this supposed to be a Christmas present?」

「Yep. You can also think of it as a return gift.」

I said while showing her the chain of the pendant I wore.

「I thought I told you I didn't need a return gift from you.」

「Yeah, you did. But you know, I already bought it, so why not just open it? And if you don't want it, you can throw it away.」

Miyagi stared at the bag in my hands so intensely that it felt like she might burn a hole through it. After a brief moment, she untied the ribbon and pulled out its contents, her expression shifting into a frown.

It was a stuffed black cat that bore a slight resemblance to Miyagi.

I hadn't chosen it because I thought she'd like it or because I wanted to make her happy. My reasoning was less optimistic. Despite how long we'd known each other, I couldn't think of anything that seemed like a suitable gift for her. And since I knew she wouldn't accept anything too extravagant, I settled on something small and simple—something I wouldn't mind as much if she decided to reject it.

The possibility of her throwing it away had also crossed my mind.

Although Miyagi didn't seem like the type to discard gifts, I couldn't be sure if she'd treat something from me the same way she treated gifts from others. I didn't think she'd toss it, but I couldn't say for certain either.

「Why a stuffed animal?」

Miyagi asked, holding the black cat in her hands and inspecting it with a lack of enthusiasm.

「I thought the crocodile could use a friend.」

I said, gesturing toward the tissue box on the floor with its

crocodile-shaped cover.

「Oh, really? Are you sure it's not meant to be food for it?」

「No, it's supposed to be a friend. Don't feed it to the crocodile.」

「I didn't prepare a Christmas present for you, though.」

Miyagi moved to sit on the floor, gently placing the black cat plush on the crocodile's back. The white tissues sprouting from the crocodile now served as a soft cushion for the cat.

I felt a small sense of relief—it seemed the cat had found a safe place and avoided a tragic fate.

「I told you, it's meant to be a return gift, so it'd only get awkward if you gave me something in return again.」

「That wasn't meant to be a present for you.」

Miyagi replied, her gaze flickering toward the pendant I was wearing.

「Yeah, yeah.」

I muttered dismissively, shifting my attention back to the crocodile and its new companion.

Despite staring for a while, I couldn't tell if the crocodile was pleased about its new "friend." More importantly, I couldn't tell if Miyagi liked it either.

Well, at least she didn't reject it. That's good enough.

Christmas presents didn't need to be overly complicated, and giving her something felt better than giving her nothing at all.

Wanting to change gears, I sat down beside her.

As I did so, Miyagi's quiet voice broke the silence.

「Well… thank you.」

I glanced over at Miyagi, not used to her showing gratitude.

Without looking over at me, she turned her focus to the table, spreading out her textbooks.

「I'm going to study now.」

It wasn't like we could pretend nothing had happened between us on the bed. The strange tension lingered, even if the awkwardness had mostly faded. Still, it seemed safer to focus on studying than risk saying something that might make things uncomfortable again.

I lowered my gaze to my textbook, but I couldn't help being conscious of Miyagi sitting beside me. When I thought about reaching out, the atmosphere around her felt colder, and I stopped myself.

I knew better than to expect anything more today. I should just stay quiet, but somehow, the connection between my brain and mouth had short-circuited.

I poked her arm lightly with my pencil, though she didn't look at me.

「Hey, Miyagi. Can I add one more condition to our deal?」

「After all you did just now? Absolutely not. Wasn't that enough for you? And didn't you say you wouldn't have much free time over winter break? You're really pushing it.」

Miyagi glanced up from her textbook, her tone as thorny as ever, as she threw an eraser at me.

「Let me kiss you during winter break.」

「I don't recall saying you could add more conditions.」

「Can't I at least ask?」

I placed the eraser back on her notebook, and she sighed, replying quietly with,

「Really? Is that all?」

「Yep.」

「… I know if I say no, you're not going to come over and help me study.」

「So, does that mean you'll let me?」

「I don't want to, but… you'll keep your promise and help me, right?」

Miyagi answered, her tone thornier than before, as she turned a page of her textbook.

Her reply wasn't exactly clear, but it felt like my condition had been accepted. I couldn't help but feel a little surprised— I hadn't expected Miyagi to be this eager to get me to come over for winter break. For a moment, I even doubted my ears.

Still, I didn't dare ask for confirmation. Before Miyagi could reconsider and reject the idea of a condition entirely, I quickly answered, "Of course," hoping to end the conversation there.

「I'll let you know when I need help.」

Miyagi spoke without glancing away from her textbook.

「Sure, but could you let me know a day in advance?」

「Okay.」

Her eyes stayed fixed on the page as I took a sip of my black tea, now completely cold.

Chapter 30 Extra

Black Cat's Soliloquy

(Black Cat PoV)
Part 96-extra

A stuffed black cat was chosen from among many companions, selected by a beautiful girl with long, slightly brown hair.

That’s me.

But, it wasn't such a good thing. Separated from my many companions, I was quickly confined to a dark, narrow, and lonely place called a 'bag.'

I don't know how much time passed after that, but it was just a little before Christmas when I met Shiori-chan.

Yet, that wasn’t a good thing, either.

Because the first time we met, Shiori-chan didn’t look happy. I felt sad and wanted to return to my companions, but soon enough, I found myself really liking Shiori-chan.

Shiori-chan seemed neither cheerful nor engaging, but she would sleep with me. She told me that after graduating from a place called high school, she'd be going to a place called college.

She also taught me other things, like how cats meow and have a liking for something called bonito flakes. She even assigned me a job to guard books on the bookshelf.

—Though, that role is a bit dull.

But Shiori-chan also introduced me to a friend, a tissue case alligator.

In truth, it was Sendai-san who referred to me as the alligator’s friend, while Shiori-chan called me its food. But I was never made

into food, so that means Shiori-chan is kind.

She lets me ride on the alligator's back and speaks to me, so I'm sure Shiori-chan likes me too.

However, I'm not sure what Shiori-chan thinks about Sendai-san.

I thought they were friends because Sendai-san visits Shiori-chan's room, but Shiori-chan always seems bored when Sendai-san is there.

It's strange.
Friends shouldn't be boring.

What could it mean?
I don't really understand.

Recently, the alligator said Sendai-san isn't Shiori-chan's friend and even called her a bad person who deceives Shiori-chan.

What could it mean?
I don't really understand 'deceive,' either.

But apparently, the alligator doesn't quite understand the meaning, either.

There's so much around Shiori-chan that I don't understand.
But still, I'm so happy to have met Shiori-chan.
Being with Shiori-chan makes me very happy.

I hope she takes me along when she goes to this place called college.

Chapter 31

The Things Sendai-san Knew (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 97

The black cat plushie that Sendai-san gave me today was now sitting beside my pillow.

If I left it on top of the tissue box with the crocodile cover, I wouldn't be able to get any tissues, and it'd probably topple over. If I put it on my desk, it'd just get in the way of my studying, and putting it on the bookshelf would make reaching for books a hassle.

So, I had no other option but to place it next to my pillow. Not that I wanted to.

「Are you happy to have a friend now?」

I asked the crocodile, which usually sat on the floor, as I pulled it onto my bed. It stayed silent, even now that it was next to the black cat. Naturally, it didn't respond—if it had, that would've been terrifying.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder what Sendai-san was thinking.

The crocodile was just a tissue cover. My room wasn't decorated with stuffed animals or anything, and I'd never mentioned liking them. I hadn't even said I liked animals, let alone cats.

So why had she decided to give me a stuffed black cat for Christmas?

Sendai-san didn't seem like the kind of person who'd give a stuffed animal as a gift. That's why I kept thinking there must have been some reason behind her choice. But at the same time, it could just as easily be meaningless—like she'd picked it out without considering how I'd feel.

Though, if she'd given me an accessory like the one I gave her, I doubt I would've accepted it. It was probably because she gave me something as casual as a stuffed animal that I didn't reject it outright.

But the real issue was that now there was yet another reminder of her in my room.

「I still don't know what to do with her uniform…」

I glanced over at my closet while stroking the black cat's head.

Sendai-san's blouse was still hanging in there.

Her blouse, which I'd never worn, held so many memories, yet I couldn't bring myself to throw it out. For now, it sat tucked away in my closet, blending in as though it were just another part of my own uniform.

Now, with the black cat Sendai-san gave me, there was yet another thing in my room that reminded me of her. Even if I wanted to seal away the memories of today, this made it impossible to forget them.

This is really troubling…

I put the crocodile back on the floor, exhaled deeply, and closed my eyes.

What happened on the bed earlier was so incredibly embarrassing, but what I didn't want Sendai-san to realize was that, even after all that, I still didn't want to stop her from coming over.

Whenever Sendai-san was around, somehow, we always ended up crossing lines we hadn't planned to. I couldn't deny that I was at least curious about doing a little more with her, but I felt I was far too indulgent with her.

No sex.

That was a rule Sendai-san herself had made, and it seemed so obvious I hadn't even thought there was a point in setting it. But we'd pushed that rule—not just today, but also during summer

break.

I'd never planned to let her take things this far.

If I tried to pin the blame on Sendai-san, she'd just say it was my fault for letting it happen. But this time, I really had no choice—it was something I needed to do to make sure she'd come over during winter break.

Now that I thought about it, maybe the reason Sendai-san hadn't mentioned winter break until today was because she'd been waiting for the chance to strike a deal with me. The thought made me feel a little frustrated, as if she were forcing me to accept that everything that happened today couldn't be helped—and that all of it was her fault.

On top of that, I was even more frustrated by how willing I was to forgive her without a second thought.

Sendai-san always left the final decision to me. She rarely made any choices herself, and she had a way of carefully shaping the options I could pick from.

It wasn't fair.

She'd make rules and then break them whenever it suited her. She'd make advances on me like it was nothing.

I was the one who'd planted the seeds of this relationship by paying her five thousand yen. Those seeds weren't meant to grow; they were supposed to stay buried deep underground, never sprouting. But for some reason, Sendai-san kept watering them, making them grow.

I never asked her to do that.

If she'd just left those seeds alone, we could've made it all the way to graduation without incident. But once they started sprouting, it became hard to ignore them. I'd feel guilty about uprooting them now, and the more they grew, the harder it was to think about pulling them out.

I was starting to regret making the graduation ceremony the last day of our arrangement.

That said, I couldn't say I regretted what happened today, but it bothered me that I was the only one feeling embarrassed. It felt like I was the only one losing out.

It made me want to call Sendai-san and vent, but we didn't have the sort of relationship where we could just call each other whenever we wanted.

It wasn't late enough to go to sleep yet, and I found myself wondering what she'd do if I actually called her. But after everything that happened today, I couldn't bring myself to pick up the phone and complain to her.

After what happened earlier, we spent the rest of the day together like nothing had changed, but I couldn't bring myself to invite her for dinner. Sendai-san didn't mention it either and left without a word. I'd been pretending I wasn't uncomfortable, but deep down, I was already dreading the idea of inviting her over during winter break.

「Sendai-san really complicated things…」

If I invited her over right after winter break started, it might come across like I was expecting something, but if I didn't call her at all, it'd render everything we did today pointless.

I picked up the stuffed black cat sitting next to my pillow, but just as I was about to throw it at the ceiling, I stopped myself. I held its hand before setting it back down.

I was used to being alone, but today, being left alone with my thoughts only brought up things I didn't want to think about. My room felt strange, almost as if it wasn't even mine anymore.

It felt like Sendai-san's presence was still lingering, even though she was gone.

I stood up and grabbed my phone from the table.

I thought of distracting myself by talking to someone, but the word "someone" immediately made me think of Sendai-san.

But really, anyone would do. Although the black cat plush and

crocodile were here to keep me company, they didn't exactly make for great conversation partners.

I scrolled through my contacts until Maika's name appeared.

『Are you free right now? I have something I want to talk about.』

After sending her a message, she quickly responded with, "Yep, I'm free right now." I called her straight away. Hearing her familiar, cheerful voice eased my mind.

I wasn't about to tell Maika what happened today, so I decided to talk about something else instead.

Maika SS 4

Utsunomiya Maika's Skepticism

(Maika PoV)
Part 97-extra

Shiori and Sendai-san.

I'd been wondering about this for a while.

On the surface, Shiori and Sendai-san didn't seem to have much in common, yet maybe they were actually friends. When they ran into each other in the hallway, the way they acted made it feel like there was some sort of connection between them, as if it wasn't strange at all to assume they knew each other well.

But every time I asked Shiori about it, she'd brush it off, saying they weren't close, just former classmates. I wanted to believe her, but after I'd bumped into Sendai-san myself and talked with her, I started to feel a little doubtful.

As the classroom buzzed around us, I glanced over at Shiori, who was standing by my desk.

"Hey, Shiori?"

When I'd casually mentioned Shiori's name to Sendai-san on the way to the school store, her reaction had been more surprised—and interested—than I expected. Since then, I hadn't been able to shake my curiosity.

"What is it?"

Shiori asked, turning to look at me.

I was tempted to ask about Sendai-san, but something held me back. I felt like she'd just brush it off with the same answers she'd given me before, so I couldn't quite find the right words to say. While I sat there hesitating, Shiori looked a bit puzzled and asked again,

“What’s up?”

"What are you having for lunch today?"

"… Maika, that’s not really what you want to ask, is it?"

Shiori placed her hands on my desk and asked, “What did you actually want to ask?”

"No, really! I’m actually interested in what you’re having for lunch. I was wondering if you’d share a bite with me."

If I could just talk with Shiori alone, somewhere quiet instead of the classroom, maybe she’d answer differently—but that’d make things feel way more serious than they needed to be. At the same time, if I pressed her about it here and now, she’d probably just brush me off with, “Sendai-san’s not my friend, and we’re not close,” and it’d just make things awkward.

"Don’t worry, Ami-chan can answer that for you. Shiori is probably having… bread for lunch!"

For some reason, Ami, standing across from Shiori, declared in an overly loud voice. The classroom was bustling during the break, but there was no need for her to be that loud.

"Ami, you’re too loud."

Shiori said, sounding exasperated.

"Wait, Shiori, so you’re not having bread today?"

"Well, I am…"

"If bread’s all you’re eating, you’re not going to get enough nutrients."

Ami said in an unusually serious tone.

Shiori sighed.

"It’s not like I eat bread every day. But anyway, Maika—what was it you wanted to ask earlier?"

"Well… can I ask you something about Sendai-san?"

I repeated the same question I'd asked Shiori several times before.

"I mean, even if you ask about her, I can't really tell you much. I don't know Sendai-san that well."

"Yeah, that's true."

Maybe it'd be best to just drop it for now.

Right as I was thinking that, Ami chimed in with,

"Hmm, but it did feel kinda weird when you and Sendai-san bumped into each other in the hallway the other day."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I dunno, something just felt a little off."

"What did?"

"Well, you know… You get what I mean, right, Maika?"

Ami looked over at me and gave my shoulder a pat.

"I guess it did seem kind of strange."

In a slightly hurried tone, Shiori replied,

"There was nothing strange about it at all. I was just really spaced out, so it surprised me when I bumped into someone. Maybe that made my reaction seem weird? If anything, you two get way too excited when it comes to talking about Sendai-san."

Ami grinned and replied, "You noticed, huh?"

"That's enough about this topic. You two should just drop it already."

I stared at Shiori, looking troubled, and Ami, who had started it, as they argued.

When I'd bumped into Sendai-san the other day, I'd found out that

her top university choice was close to mine, so I told her that Shiori was applying to the same university as me.

At that time, something about Sendai-san's reaction made it seem like she and Shiori had some kind of connection between them. In reality, though, there weren't many things linking them together. Still, if I assumed they really were friends, suddenly a lot of things seemed to make sense.

But thinking like this wouldn't do any good; assumptions could lead to misunderstandings.

And there was something else I needed to find out.

"Shiori, you're applying to the same university as me, right?"

I asked Shiori, who was still bickering with Ami. Ever since I'd spoken with Sendai-san, there was something on my mind that I felt I had to confirm, no matter what.

"Yeah, but why are you asking out of the blue?"

"Oh, just curious. Have you spoken to anyone else about your university plans?"

"No, and I don't really feel the need to."

"I see."

"Which means that only Maika and I know about where you're applying to. It's like our little secret!"

Ami said, as if we were in on something private.

"Yeah, I guess so. You two are the only ones I've talked to about this."

Shiori said with an uncertain smile on her face, her tone neither bright nor gloomy.

Seeing Shiori like that, I realized I'd made a terrible mistake—I'd told Sendai-san which school Shiori was applying to.

Regret flooded over me.

I owed her an apology.

But to do that, I'd have to come clean about everything I told Sendai-san. Just thinking about having to do that someday left me feeling a little down.

The Things Sendai-san Knew (II)

Part 98

「Was your room always like this?」

Maika asked, sounding puzzled as she spread her textbooks out on the table.

「Yep. Welcome to my room.」

I answered casually, but she seemed a bit skeptical—and she wasn't wrong. My room was slightly different from the first time Maika had been here.

I'd gotten a slightly bigger table, and there were more things lying around now.

It was the third day of winter break, and Maika was as perceptive as ever.

「Oh yeah. Where's your space heater? Didn't you say you bought one last year?」

She was referring to something I'd been using until the start of the year but wasn't in my room at the moment.

Her memory sure is sharp.

She was right though—this was something we had talked about last year.

「Yeah, but I don't need it right now.」

I hadn't used the space heater at all this season. It had been a lifesaver ever since I bought it, but this year, I decided I wouldn't need it. Not because of Sendai-san, who constantly complained that the room was too warm, but simply because I felt the air conditioner alone would be enough to get through the winter.

「If you're cold, want me to turn up the temperature?」

I asked, reaching for the air conditioner remote. But Maika, seated across from me, shook her head and replied, “No, I’m okay.”

We were supposed to study at Maika’s place today, but our plans had suddenly changed. Apparently, her relatives had shown up unannounced, so she’d been kicked out of her house, and we ended up studying at mine instead.

I was reluctant about letting Maika come over. This room was full of things that carried traces of Sendai-san. But if I’d refused, that would’ve been suspicious.

「Were you always a fan of cats, Shiori?」

Even though her homework was spread out on the table, Maika’s attention wandered to my bookshelf. Her gaze settled on the black cat plush leaning casually against a pillow.

I’d moved it to the bookshelf before Maika arrived, making it look like it had always been there, perfectly content in its new home.

「Well, not exactly…」

「That’s what I thought. So, did someone give it to you, then?」

「No, I bought it myself. I wanted to give it a friend.」

I gestured toward the crocodile placed beside the table.

「This thing?」

Maika pulled the crocodile, the designated guardian of the tissue box, closer to inspect it.

「Yep.」

「Well, the plush is cute, so I can totally see why you’d want to buy it, but… I see. You bought it to give it a friend, huh.」

Maika said as she patted the crocodile’s head.

「Yeah, I didn't want it to feel lonely all by itself.」

I got up on my knees, grabbed the crocodile from across the table, and gently placed it back on the floor.

「Hey, Shiori. Did something happen recently?」

「Why do you ask?」

「Why? Well, it feels like we haven't really hung out much since we became third years. And then over summer break, you were so busy that I barely saw you at all.」

Maika said, sulking slightly.

「I mean, you were busy at cram school all of summer break, weren't you?」

「That's true, but I was wondering if you had something else going on.」

「It sounds more like you're the one who had something going on. You mentioned you wanted to talk about something too, right? What's up?」

"Let's study together."

That's what Maika had written in her message last night. But she'd also added, 『There's something I need to talk to you about』, making it seem like today was more about what she wanted to discuss than studying.

Considering Maika said she would be busy with cram school during winter break, the fact that she went out of her way for this meant what she wanted to talk about had to be pretty important.

「Oh, right. So, what I wanted to talk about was…」

For some reason, she wasn't being very direct about it.

Seeing how hesitant Maika was now made me realize this wasn't going to be a pleasant conversation, and I felt uneasy.

「Can I apologize first?」

「… Is what you're going to say so bad that it needs an apology?」

「I'm not sure, but I feel like I should apologize, so… I'm sorry.」

This was a discussion she'd arranged under the pretense of a study session, and now she was starting with an apology. It didn't feel like a conversation I wanted to have, but since things had come this far already, I told her, "Go on…"

「Do you remember when I asked if you and Sendai-san were close?」

「We're not, but… is this what you wanted to talk about?」

Maika still hadn't gotten to the main point, but I could already tell this wasn't going in a good direction. It made me want to hold my head in my hands.

Sendai-san was the last person I wanted to hear about and the last thing I wanted to discuss.

「Well, yeah. Something along those lines.」

Maika gave a vague response and sipped her soda.

After letting out a sigh, she began speaking softly.

「So, remember when I told you I ran into Sendai-san on my way to the school store the other day? Actually, there's something about that encounter that's been bothering me, so I thought I should tell you.」

That happened back in November—on the same day Sendai-san hugged me in the music preparation room.

Maika had mentioned seeing Sendai-san in the hallway and chatting with her.

I remembered that day clearly.

I'd asked Maika what they'd talked about, and at the time, she

said it wasn't anything important. But if she was bringing it up now, that meant she'd been hiding something from me.

I started to feel anxious.

「Okay, so what is it?」

「You know how I told Sendai-san about the university I'm aiming for, right? She told me her top choice, too, and we realized the schools we were aiming for are close by… And then I ended up mentioning your name.」

「Huh? Wait, so…」

「I'm sorry, Shiori. I accidentally told Sendai-san that you're aiming for the same university as me. I guess I really shouldn't have said that, huh.」

Maika looked at me with an expression full of regret.

「—— Oh, it's fine. That's not even something you need to apologize for. I've barely ever talked to Sendai-san, so it's not like we're close or anything. I wouldn't get mad just because you brought up university stuff.」

That was a lie.

I wasn't exactly mad, but it was definitely not fine.

Of course, I couldn't say that aloud.

But I was so shaken, my temples throbbed.

No one knew about the relationship Sendai-san and I had—not even Maika.

So there was no reason to feel so anxious, and no reason to panic. As long as I brushed this off like it was nothing, the conversation would naturally come to an end.

But the speed of my words betrayed me, making my excuse sound forced. Maybe because of that, Maika was now eyeing me with doubt.

「Anyway, why are you bringing this up now after staying quiet for so long?」

「At first, I didn't think it was necessary to mention, but Sendai-san seemed unusually curious about you, and honestly, you've been acting strange lately too. After piecing things together in my head, I thought it'd be better to talk to you about it. Besides, I've got this feeling you and Sendai-san are actually pretty close.」

She claimed it was just a "feeling," but her tone suggested she didn't believe what I'd said.

Her doubt made the guilt of lying weigh heavily on me, and my throat felt like it was closing. I could hardly breathe.

「I've told you before, Sendai-san and I aren't close. Don't you think she was just asking about me because she couldn't think of anything else to say?」

I looked at Maika, silently pleading for calm to return to me.

「Well, that might be true, but are you two really not——」

Maika began to speak but abruptly cut herself off.

Perhaps feeling guilty for hiding this until now, she swallowed her words and instead said, "Actually, no, I'm sorry."

「Okay, let's just get to studying now. Can you help me with this question, Maika?」

Usually, I'd press her to finish what she started to say or point out how odd it was to stop midway, but today, I didn't bother. Instead, I pretended not to notice and slid my workbook across the table toward her. Maika hesitated, as if she still wanted to ask something, but she held back. Perhaps sensing I didn't want to continue the conversation, she glanced at the workbook and asked, "Which one?"

Maika was always so kind.

I relied on that kindness constantly, and today, it saved me from having to explain myself. Yet, even as I sat here with Maika, my thoughts were consumed by Sendai-san.

I knew it wasn't right to think this way, especially since we were supposed to be studying together, but I couldn't get what I'd just heard out of my head.

Sendai-san found out what university I was going for.

There was no way I could stay calm after hearing that.

I had kept it a secret all this time.

I had never mentioned it to her, not even once.

And yet, she knew.

She'd known even on that day she hugged me in the music preparation room.

Maika's voice started to feel distant. I could hear her talking, but her words were hard to make out.

I'd considered the possibility that Sendai-san knew, but I reassured myself that it was something she couldn't be certain of.

And yet…

We continued studying, though my mind was elsewhere, and Maika ended up leaving earlier than planned.

I remembered walking her to the elevator, seeing her off at the entrance to the apartment building, but I couldn't recall what we'd talked about.

Now, I was alone in my room again, sitting on my bed.

Before I realized it, it was already past eight in the evening, but it wasn't too late to make a phone call.

After a long moment of hesitation, I picked up my phone and called Sendai-san.

After just two rings, her surprised voice came through on the other end.

「Wow, it's pretty unusual getting a call from you, Miyagi.」

There were things I wanted to ask. That was why I called her.

Why had she pushed me so hard to tell her what university I wanted to go to when she already knew?

Why had she been trying to nudge me toward the same university as her or one nearby, knowing full well which school I was aiming for?

Those were the things I wanted to know.

Right now, I couldn't help but think she had done all of that just to see how I'd react, and the idea irritated me. But if she had another reason, I wanted her to tell me. I wanted her to deny that she'd done it just to tease me.

Even so, for some reason, I felt like I couldn't ask her those questions over the phone.

「Sendai-san, come over and help me study. Right now.」

「Right now? I'm already home, so I really can't.」

Of course, I already knew that.

It wasn't too late for a phone call, but it was late for a high school student to leave the house.

Still, I wanted her to come over now, so we could talk face-to-face.

「Even if you can't, come over anyway.」

「Can I not just come over tomorrow?」

「No. If that's the case, then don't bother coming over at all.」

「Well, I can go right now as long as you'll let me stay over.」

「That's enough. I'm going to hang up now.」

「I always make that joke though. What's gotten into you today?」

She had probably caught on to the tension in my tone and was just trying to ease it with a joke. I understood what she was doing, but I couldn't bring myself to laugh or reply.

「… Sendai-san. Don't you have anything you want to say to me?」

「Uh, not really? Why? Did I do something?」

Sendai-san responded in her usual tone, oblivious to what I was referring to. It was only natural that she wouldn't know how to respond, yet I couldn't help but feel irritated with her.

「Fine. If you don't have anything to say, then forget it. Don't bother showing up during the break at all.」

I vented my frustration at her, and Sendai-san responded with a troubled tone.

「Alright, can you wait a bit? I'll head over now.」

I knew I shouldn't be this upset with her. I was extremely irritated—but at the same time, I just really wanted to see her. And I was angry at myself for feeling that way.

「… Never mind. Just come over tomorrow.」

「Seriously, is something wrong?」

「Nothing's wrong. If you've got prep school, then come after that. Just make sure you're here tomorrow. No matter what.」

「Well, I said I'd head over now, so just wait for me.」

Her voice was much gentler than I'd expected.

「No, really. Tomorrow's fine.」

I tried to keep my tone as calm as possible, and she replied with, "Okay, tomorrow then. I promise."

The Things Sendai-san Knew (III)

Part 99

"Why did you call me yesterday? Wasn't there something you wanted to talk about?"

I wouldn't have been surprised if Sendai-san had asked me those questions.

But instead, she'd been sitting quietly next to me since she arrived. The only thing she'd said so far was, "Sorry I'm late." Now, her attention was entirely on the reference books spread across the table.

She had arrived a bit later than I expected today, likely trying to be considerate by showing up at all despite it being nearly eight o'clock. Perhaps her decision to not bring up yesterday's phone call was just another way of showing kindness.

Still, something about this felt unnatural.

Normally, the first thing Sendai-san would do is ask about the phone call. But instead, she sat silently in this awkward atmosphere, and it made it hard for me to speak up. Meanwhile, Maika's words kept replaying in my mind.

I glanced over at Sendai-san as I took a sip of soda.

「Are you not going to ask about yesterday?」

If I didn't bring it up, the day would probably pass without us doing anything but studying.

That was what we'd agreed to do over winter break, so it wasn't like there was anything wrong with that. But today's study session was clearly just an excuse. If we didn't talk about it, there'd be no point in calling her over in the first place.

「You mean the phone call?」

Her curious voice came from beside me.

「I thought for sure you'd bring it up today.」

「I came to help you study. Isn't that what you asked me to do yesterday?」

Sendai-san replied, lifting her gaze as she placed her pencil on the table.

Then, she turned to face me directly.

「But if there's something you want to talk about, I'll listen. There's something on your mind, isn't there?」

Her tone was reluctant, but not enough to seem annoyed or like she found this bothersome.

I should've been used to seeing her like this, but for some reason, I felt uneasy today. Maybe it was because she wasn't wearing her school uniform.

Instead, she had on a simple knit top and a skirt—nothing special, the kind of outfit you could find anywhere. If I wore something like that, it'd probably look cheap, but on Sendai-san, it suited her. She had a way of making plain things seem polished. I hadn't seen her in casual clothes since summer break, so seeing her like this now felt strange, like there was an odd distance between us. And because of that, I couldn't summon the courage to ask her what I really wanted to.

「… What about you, Sendai-san? Don't you have anything to say to me?」

「You asked me that yesterday, too. I told you, I don't. Now, what about you, Miyagi? What did you want to talk about?」

The whole reason I'd asked her to come over was to have this conversation. If I wanted to get it out, today had to be the day. But even though the words were clear in my mind, they wouldn't leave my mouth. The silence dragged on until, finally, Sendai-san spoke up instead.

「I'm guessing the thing you want to talk about isn't

something I'd want to be asked about anyway. And honestly, you don't seem to be in the best mood right now. If you don't feel like saying it, why not just drop it?」

Her tone was heavier than before.

I took a deep breath, exhaled, and finally forced myself to speak.

「Sendai-san, tell me what you and Maika talked about when you bumped into each other in the hallway.」

「What I talked about with Utsunomiya…? Oh, you mean that time we were both headed to the school store?」

Her voice immediately softened, quieter now, as though I'd just touched upon something she'd rather avoid.

「Yeah.」

「I thought I already told you. She just asked me about that one time I came to your classroom to find you.」

There was no way I could forget that.

She'd told me the same thing that day we met up in the music preparation room, and I'd believed her. But now, I knew she had left parts of the truth unsaid.

「That's not everything, is it? You talked about other things, didn't you? Like what university I'm applying to.」

「… Oh, I see. Utsunomiya told you, didn't she?」

Sendai-san's voice softened, as if everything had suddenly fallen into place for her.

「Yeah, she told me yesterday. You already knew which university I was aiming for, so why did you ask me about it in the music preparation room? Was it just to see my reaction and mock me?」

She must've assumed that, with my grades having improved recently, I'd changed my first-choice school to chase after her. And I

couldn't help but feel that she'd kept quiet about it on purpose, waiting for the right moment to confront me and tease me about it.

But that wasn't why I'd changed my school of choice.

I wasn't following her, and I'd already decided I wouldn't see her anymore after graduation.

It was a coincidence—nothing more. The school I switched to was close to Sendai-san's, but that wasn't my intention. I'd changed it because I wanted to go to the same school as Maika, nothing else.

It'd be ridiculous if there was a deeper meaning behind it, and Sendai-san would be mistaken if she believed there was.

And now, I just wanted her to answer me.

But instead, she just stayed silent, a serious expression etched onto her face.

「Answer me, Sendai-san.」

I pressed her, my tone firm, and finally, she replied with a voice as grave as her expression.

「——Did it seem like I was asking because I wanted to mock you?」

Sendai-san's gaze wandered to the bookshelf, landing on the black cat plush she'd given me.

「I just wanted to hear about your university plans from you directly.」

She responded without waiting for my answer despite being the one who had asked a question.

「If that's the case, you could've just asked me. Or told me you'd heard it from Maika already.」

I wasn't trying to sound angry, but the firmness in my voice made her shift her gaze from the plush to me.

「If I had asked you, you'd probably just deny that you were

applying to the same university as Utsunomiya.」

「That's――」

She was right. If she'd told me Maika had mentioned it, I would've brushed it off as a joke or something I'd said casually, then picked a different school instead.

「So, what are you planning to do for university, then?」

Her question sounded like one a teacher would ask.

「I'm not telling you.」

「Come on, just say it.」

「I haven't decided.」

「You know it's too late to still be indecisive. I'm sure you've decided already, but if not, you should go to the same school as Utsunomiya.」

She was right—it was too late to be uncertain, and I had already made my decision. I was going to apply to the same university as Maika, but I didn't want to admit it to her.

It felt like agreeing with her would make it seem like I was doing it just because she said so. I had my own reasons and choices. I didn't want everything I did to feel like it revolved around her. And besides, why was she so obsessed with wanting to know where I was applying to anyway?

「Why do I even need to tell you my plans? And why do you keep pushing for me to go to the same university as you or somewhere close to you? Does it matter where I go?」

Though my tone was a bit sharp, it wasn't like I was angry. Still, Sendai-san's expression clouded, and she fell quiet.

I took a few sips of soda to fill the awkward silence, but a faint unease crept in, as if I'd just said something out of line.

I wasn't feeling cold or anything, but I reached for the air conditioner remote. Just as I was about to raise the temperature,

Sendai-san spoke up.

「—— Miyagi, don't you want to keep seeing me? 」

Her words didn't answer my question at all and came out softly, tinged with an anxious tone I'd never heard from her before. It reminded me of a lost child timidly asking for help.

「We agreed, didn't we? That we'd stop seeing each other after graduation. 」

It wasn't something I wanted to bring up again, but I needed to remind her of the terms we'd settled on.

She hadn't answered my question, and I could've avoided hers too. But hearing her speak in that tone made it hard to ignore.

「I know that. But I want to hear it directly from you—do you really not want to keep seeing me after we graduate? 」

「… What about you, Sendai-san? 」

「I want to keep seeing you, Miyagi. I think it'll be fun. 」

I'd expected her to reprimand me for answering her question with another question, but instead, she answered honestly.

「I don't know about you, Miyagi, but I've come to really enjoy being in this room. I think it'd be boring if we ended things. 」

Sendai-san said something she usually wouldn't.

"I want to keep seeing you."

Those were words anyone could say, but even if they meant them today, they might not tomorrow.

Even my father had made plenty of promises to me—saying he'd come home more often or that we'd have dinner together—yet he rarely ever kept them.

And Sendai-san wasn't exactly good at keeping her promises either. She often broke the ones she made with me.

One of the few promises she did keep was continuing to wear the necklace I'd given her. But since she wasn't in her school uniform today, I couldn't tell if she still had it on, and I doubted she was wearing it now.

Maybe if she'd been wearing it like always, I'd find it easier to believe her words, but I couldn't bring myself to check. Instead, all I managed was a self-deprecating remark.

「Yeah, right. Like you actually enjoy coming to my place after school just to get paid to be ordered around.」

「I mean, wouldn't it make me a pervert if I did enjoy being ordered around?」

「See? That just proves you weren't having fun this entire time.」

I said coldly, and Sendai-san gave me a troubled look.

「I wouldn't say that. It's just… I didn't know you very well at the start. I bet you didn't really enjoy being around me back then either, right?」

In the beginning, I'd thought a relationship that started on a whim could end just as easily. If I ever got bored of her, I'd simply stop asking her to come over, and that'd be that. But the truth was, I hadn't found her uninteresting.

「Well, I was pretty amused by how you always listened to my orders.」

「Wow, you've got quite the terrible personality, huh?」

「Only when it comes to you, Sendai-san.」

I answered her comment with a curt reply. A soft sigh came from beside me before she spoke again, her tone serious.

「So, Miyagi. How do you feel now? Do you think it's fun being together?」

It was either yes or no. I had to pick one.

When I thought about it, though there were some things to consider, the answer was obvious.

「…It is, as long as you don't try to do anything weird.」

「Hey, Miyagi. Tell me you want to keep seeing me even after we graduate. I swear I won't do anything weird to you.」

She was trying to get me to say something that went against our arrangement. Those were words I really didn't want to say, not when I could hardly trust Sendai-san, and I didn't want them to change anything between us either.

As I stayed silent, she let out a long sigh and leaned her back against my bed.

「Okay, fine. Let's put that aside for now. At least tell me what university you're going to once you get accepted.」

「Why should I tell you?」

「Because we're study buddies. We may not be friends, but we did study a lot together. Don't you think it's only fair to tell me that much?」

「Well, maybe…」

「Not 'maybe.' It is fair, so make sure to tell me what university you're going to.」

Sendai-san spoke as if it were only natural for me to tell her, casually forcing it on me.

I'd already decided which university I was applying to, and she knew it too. I doubted she believed me when I said I hadn't made up my mind yet. Even if I didn't say anything, she'd probably figure it out easily enough after our entrance exams were over anyway.

There wasn't much point in hiding it.

「…Fine, but no promises.」

「Okay.」

Sendai-san responded with a gentle tone, as if she was satisfied with my vague answer.

“Okay, let’s get back to studying.”

I thought that’s what she would say, so I picked up my pencil from the table. But instead, Sendai-san started putting away all her books.

「I’m going to head back now. I got here pretty late today, after all.」

It was true; she had arrived later than usual. But there were days when she’d stay even later. Without thinking, I instinctively grabbed her by the arm.

「You’re going home already?」

Not everything had been settled, and we hadn’t really resolved anything either, but I had finished saying what I needed to say. Plus, studying had just been an excuse for us to meet up and talk today, so we didn’t have to continue. But it didn’t feel right to have her leave so soon after we’d just spent all that time just talking.

「Yep.」

I couldn’t help but feel a little frustrated, remembering what I’d had to go through just to get her to come over during the break. I didn’t want her to go home so easily. I wanted her to stay just a little longer. I figured I had the right to at least that much.

But to make that happen, I had to find a way to get her to let her guard down.

「… What about our kiss?」

That was the only thing I could think of as Sendai-san stood up, getting ready to leave.

「Our kiss?」

「That was part of our deal, right?」

「That's true, but it's not like I helped you study today or anything.」

Sendai-san was hardly the type to do anything sensible, but for some reason, she was being unusually reasonable now. I tightened my grip on her arm, unable to let go just yet.

「Hey, Miyagi. That hurts.」

「Help me study a little before you go home. You promised you'd do it yesterday.」

「It'll be really late by the time I get home if I help you study now.」

I let go of her arm, taking a small breath.

After hesitating for a moment, I mumbled,

「—— Look, if it gets too late, you can just stay over.」

「Huh?」

「You're the one who suggested it over the phone yesterday, right? That you wanted to stay over.」

She was the one who wanted this.

All I was doing was granting her wish.

「You'd really let me stay over?」

「Well, no one else is home today, so it'll just be you and me.」

「That sounds kind of weird when you put it that way.」

I meant exactly what I said—no one else was home right now, and my father wasn't coming back later either. There was no other meaning behind it. If it sounded weird to her, that just meant Sendai-san was the one thinking strange things.

「Actually, never mind. Just go home.」

I pushed her arm away, and Sendai-san responded with, “Hey, I was just kidding.”

Her jokes were always in bad taste, and that one was way too loaded to be a joke. If I took everything she said seriously and responded accordingly, I’d just end up getting hurt. But at the same time, I had to be extra careful with my words, or who knew what she’d do to me.

「…I’ll let you stay over as long as you promise you won’t try anything weird.」

「That’s not really something you need to be saying to another girl, is it?」

「Sendai-san, you should reflect on what you’ve done to me so far. And if you’re not going to help me study, I’ll show you to the door.」

I said, and in response, Sendai-san pulled out her phone and said, “Okay, I’ll let my parents know first.”

Chapter 32

Miyagi's In A Bad Mood Even During Winter Break (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 100

"I want to keep seeing you even after we graduate, Miyagi."

It felt like I ended up saying a lot of things I didn't need to say.

Those words seemed unnecessary, and I had no idea how Miyagi felt hearing them. That uncertainty made it impossible to focus on studying again, so I wanted to leave early, but somehow, that didn't happen.

Instead, Miyagi started saying all sorts of unexpected things that somehow led to me staying the night.

"No one else is home today, so just stay the night."

I had fully expected to get chased out. Instead, Miyagi said something so out of character that I was still waiting for her to suddenly claim it was all just a joke.

I knew she'd called me over to talk about something. I also knew it wasn't going to be anything good. Honestly, I'd braced myself for the worst—for her to tell me she wanted to end our arrangement before graduation.

But now that things had taken such a strange turn, I couldn't quite wrap my head around what was happening.

「Sendai-san, close the refrigerator.」

「Oh, sorry.」

Miyagi's voice snapped me out of my thoughts as I stood

there, zoning out in front of the open fridge. I quickly closed the door.

Neither of us had outright suggested it, but both of us seemed to think it would be better to eat first before getting back to studying. If we really wanted to, we could buckle down and focus, but shaking off the tension from earlier wasn't easy. So, we ended up in the kitchen instead.

That was fine with me.

Except for one little problem—Miyagi's fridge.

「Once again, there's nothing in your fridge, huh.」

「Well, there are carrots in there.」

I opened the vegetable compartment, and sure enough, there were a few lonely carrots rolling around in the otherwise empty space.

「Is this the only vegetable you have?」

「Well, I have these too.」

I turned around with a carrot in hand, only for Miyagi to hand me a bag of potatoes. Then she pulled out a box of stew roux, and just like that, our dinner plans were decided.

「… But there's no protein, huh.」

I wasn't sure if Miyagi had these ingredients because she wanted to eat stew or if they were just what she happened to have lying around. Either way, it felt like something was missing.

「By protein, do you mean meat?」

「Yeah. Do you have anything else I can use instead?」

I asked as I set some carrots and some potatoes on the counter.

Making stew without meat wasn't impossible, but it felt a bit lacking without any kind of protein.

「What about this?」

As I reached for a cutting board and knife, Miyagi walked over and held out a can of corned beef.

「Oh, so you did have something good lying around. Alright, take a seat and leave the rest to me.」

I wouldn't go so far as to call Miyagi a hindrance in the kitchen, but she wasn't exactly a great help either. The thought of her holding a knife made me uneasy—what if she cut herself? And if I let her handle the pot, there was no telling what she might throw in without asking. It was simply easier to cook alone than to spend the entire time worrying about her.

Besides, the silence was more daunting than usual today.

Without having anything to talk about, I couldn't help but feel extra conscious of Miyagi's presence. It made me feel like I'd have an easier time cooking if I kept her at a distance.

I understood perfectly well why the quiet unnerved me so much.

It wasn't just because of the conversation we had earlier. The fact that I was staying the night made me feel incredibly restless. With Miyagi so close, I couldn't stop my thoughts from wandering—what was she thinking? How was she feeling?

Perhaps Miyagi felt the same way.

She looked fidgety, like she was searching for something to say.

Giving ourselves some physical distance, even for a short while, seemed like the right call. By the time the stew was done, I figured, we'd probably be back to normal.

But Miyagi didn't leave the kitchen.

「You don't need to help. Just wait over there.」

I gestured toward the living room with my eyes while rinsing

the potatoes, hoping she'd take the hint. Instead, Miyagi grabbed the potato I'd just finished washing right out of my hand.

「… I'll help.」

Her voice carried a hint of irritation.

But why?

I had expected Miyagi to feel the same way I did, wanting to put a little distance between us for now. Instead, she seemed to be deliberately staying unusually close, and I couldn't figure out why.

「What did you want to help out with?」

「Peeling the carrots and potatoes.」

Miyagi said as she picked up a knife and began clumsily working on the potatoes.

I couldn't help but stare at her hands.

「…What?」

She sounded even more irritated than before.

「Oh, nothing.」

I just hadn't expected someone who once managed to cut herself while slicing cabbage to so willingly take on this task.

I swallowed the words on my mind and turned my attention to preparing the pot. When I glanced over, I noticed a row of potatoes with thick, uneven peels lined up on the cutting board.

「Do you want me to cut the peeled vegetables?」

「No, I'll do it.」

「Are you sure you'll be okay handling that?」

「Shut up, Sendai-san. I'll get distracted if you keep talking.」

I couldn't shake the unease of letting someone who needed

total concentration to cut vegetables handle the task, but prying the knife away from Miyagi didn't feel like an option right now. All I could do was watch her chop the potatoes with slow, unsteady hands.

After several heavy thuds, Miyagi finally arranged the unevenly cut pieces on the cutting board. I took them and tossed them into an oiled pan, stirring them along with the carrot pieces before adding the corned beef. Once everything was sautéed, I added water and left the mixture in a pot to simmer, carefully skimming off the scum as it cooked.

The kitchen fell into silence again, an awkward tension lingering between us.

Eventually, Miyagi broke it with a hesitant voice.

「Sendai-san, I'm going to sit over there.」

「Okay.」

Now alone in the kitchen, I stared at the pot, its contents glaringly missing an onion, as I continued skimming off the scum.

Miyagi hadn't explicitly mentioned what university she wanted to go to.

But I was now aware that what Utsunomiya had told me was correct.

Even so, that knowledge didn't change anything. Our relationship had a clear endpoint, and Miyagi seemed set on it. Nothing I said was going to change that.

Still, I'd come to realize something: Miyagi enjoyed spending time with me. And maybe—just maybe—there was a small part of her that also wanted to keep seeing me after we graduated.

For now, I'd have to settle for that.

After finishing skimming the scum, I turned off the heat and added the stew roux.

The white chunks from the box melted into the liquid, slowly

thickening it into a creamy, pale sauce.

As the stew simmered, Miyagi's voice came from the living room.

「Is it ready now?」

「Almost. Can you get the tableware ready?」

「Okay.」

Not long after, Miyagi appeared with two curry plates of rice.

「You didn't need to serve rice. Could you grab plates for the stew instead?」

「Yeah, I did.」

「Where?」

「Here.」

She placed the curry plates with rice onto the counter.

「… You know we're having stew, right?」

「Yeah, obviously. That's why I brought these.」

I looked between her and the plates, and I realized there was only one possible explanation for this.

「Miyagi, do you… mix stew with rice?」

「Huh? You don't?」

「You know that's not normal, right?」

「I'm pretty sure it is.」

Our opinions didn't seem to line up.

Yet, for some reason, Miyagi was looking at me like I was the one completely in the wrong.

「You're supposed to mix curry with rice. Not stew.」

「Isn't stew a type of curry, though? Besides, there are fewer dishes to wash this way.」

「That's not really the problem here…」

「Does it really matter? It's all the same once it's in your stomach anyway.」

Reluctantly persuaded by Miyagi's argument, we carried the curry plates—with stew ladled over rice—over to the counter table.

「Let's eat.」

Miyagi said, and then started eating the stew as if it really was curry.

「… Let's eat.」

I followed her lead, scooping up a bit of stew and rice with my spoon and bringing it to my mouth.

It was my first time eating stew like this, but once I tasted it, I realized it wasn't bad at all. Maybe going along with Miyagi's idea wasn't such a bad thing.

I didn't have any strong feelings about keeping the stew and rice separate, and since we were at Miyagi's place, I was fine with adapting to her way of doing things.

To be honest, I was just glad we could talk about something so trivial after everything that had happened today.

But our light conversation didn't last long.

Before I knew it, silence had taken over again, leaving only the faint sound of spoons scraping against plates.

The silence felt heavier than usual today.

「Are you going to be alone on New Year's Eve this year, Miyagi?」

I struggled to find a good topic to fill the void, but in the end, I blurted out something neutral and easy to answer.

「No, someone will be home with me on New Year's Eve.」

「I see.」

「You mentioned you were going to a shrine on New Year's Day, right, Sendai-san?」

Miyagi asked, recalling what I'd told her earlier as she took another bite of her stew.

「Yep. Do you want to come too, Miyagi?」

「Of course not. You're going with Ibaraki-san, aren't you?」

「Are you saying you'd go if it weren't for her?」

「… No.」

Miyagi denied my words curtly.

I didn't mind her attitude.

Seeing her get grumpy over such a small joke made me want to tease her even more. I knew pressing her further would just sour her mood, and I'd end up regretting it, so I decided against it. Still, I couldn't help but think it was cute.

With this topic out of the way now, there wasn't much else left to discuss. There's only so much to say about our plans during winter break or the upcoming exams. It made me tempted to bring up subjects I knew I shouldn't.

「You've never let me stay over like this before… so why the change of heart today?」

I knew Miyagi's words were meant to be taken at face value and didn't carry any deeper meaning.

She most likely just wanted someone to have dinner with, or maybe she was starting to feel a bit lonely as the end of the year quickly approached. Perhaps it was something else along those

lines. There was no way Miyagi had invited me to stay the night because she'd been expecting something else.

Even so, I couldn't help but be conscious of the idea.

I started feeling like maybe I could allow myself to hope, just a little, so I wanted Miyagi to say something that would prove otherwise.

「… I told you, I just wanted you to help me study, didn't I?」

「That you did.」

「Then why are you even asking?」

Miyagi responded coldly.

I'd promised to help her study over winter break.

But today, she'd just used that as an excuse to call me over. I wasn't convinced that studying was all she wanted from me, but she wasn't going to tell me any other reason.

「Sendai-san, wash the dishes when you're done.」

Miyagi said as she stood up, her empty stew bowl in hand—I hadn't even noticed she'd finished eating.

「Yeah, sure.」

I replied, watching her leave the living room and head back to her room.

After finishing my stew and washing the dishes, I went to Miyagi's room, only to find it empty.

I felt a small sense of relief and let out a quiet sigh. Just then, the door opened.

「You can take a bath first. Are you okay with wearing my sweats afterward?」

Miyagi asked, opening her closet as she spoke.

「Huh? Oh, uh, sure.」

I stammered, giving her a vague answer.

「Okay, then take this. A change of clothes and a towel.」

She handed me a set of navy-blue sweats and a white towel.

「Oh, the bath's already heated?」

「Yeah, I prepared it before we started eating. There's a hair dryer and everything else ready for you too.」

She wasn't physically pushing me out of her room, but it felt like she was chasing me away, so I quickly made my way to the bathroom.

There was a basket in front of the washing machine, so I placed the sweats in it.

Oh, right.

I didn't bring a change of clothes, so I guess this is to be expected.

On the day I'd come over soaked from the rain, I'd had to borrow her clothes.

And there was that one time when I'd forgotten to bring my gym clothes to school and had to borrow some from a friend in another class.

So wearing someone else's clothes wasn't that big of a deal.

But for some reason, today, I felt so self-conscious about it.

I couldn't let it bother me.

I knew it didn't make sense to feel this way.

I gave my cheeks a gentle slap to snap myself out of it, then removed the pendant I was wearing, leaving it on top of the sweats.

As I started to undress, I felt a strange urge to glance behind

me. I turned and found my own reflection in the mirror. I looked just as I always did, but somehow, today, I couldn't bear to look at myself.

Turning away, I spotted a hair dryer and a hairbrush sitting neatly on the sink.

It should've been obvious, but I became acutely aware that everything here was Miyagi's—not mine.

I closed my eyes briefly, then opened them again.

After letting out a small sigh, I opened the door to the bath.

Miyagi's In A Bad Mood Even During Winter Break (II)

Part 101

Whoever said taking a bath was supposed to be relaxing was a liar.

I felt nothing but tense and uneasy. The water only seemed to harden my body, as if it were turning me into concrete. Nothing about this situation was making me feel relaxed.

I knew exactly why.

It was because I was currently taking a bath in Miyagi's bathroom, and she and I were the only ones home. Sure, it was normal for no one else to be around in her apartment, but today, for some reason, it felt different.

I pressed my palms against my temples and let out a deep breath.

「All we're going to do after this is study. Everything will be fine.」

I wasn't really sure what I was trying to reassure myself of, but the words came out anyway as I pulled myself out of the bath.

Eating dinner together, taking a bath at someone else's place, and sleeping in the same room—none of that was strange. These were just normal things to do when staying over at someone's house. There was no reason to be so self-conscious about any of it.

At times like this, it was better to get things done quickly and not dwell on them.

I washed my hair and body before leaving the bathing room.

After drying off, I put on the sweats Miyagi had lent me.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I put my pendant back on. There I was, dressed in Miyagi's clothes. The fit seemed perfect—not too tight, but not too loose either.

But something about it still felt off.

It wasn't that the clothes didn't fit—they were just ordinary sweats—but somehow, it felt like I wasn't fully contained by them. As if, even though they were simple fabric, wearing them made me feel like Miyagi's presence was somehow close by.

「These are just ordinary sweats. Nothing more.」

This was getting ridiculous.

There was no reason to let myself get caught up in this.

I grabbed the hair dryer and switched it on. As I started drying my hair, something obvious caught my attention: the shampoo smelled exactly like Miyagi's. My hands froze. The lukewarm air continued to blow out in a steady roar against the same spot of my hair.

「Seriously, what is wrong with me right now?」

I exhaled loudly.

Even the smallest things could grow into something massive if they kept piling up.

All the little details about Miyagi that I had never really noticed were now clinging to me, slowly consuming my thoughts.

I swallowed, feeling like another sigh was on its way.

I moved my hands again, properly drying my hair before heading back to Miyagi's room.

「I'm back.」

I said to Miyagi, who was engrossed in a book. She didn't reply with anything like, "Welcome back," and instead silently stood up and opened her closet.

「You can help yourself to some barley tea in the refrigerator if you want.」

She spoke without looking at me. Then, as she pulled out what looked like a change of clothes, she added, “I’m going to take a bath now,” before leaving the room.

Left on my own, I decided to follow her suggestion and headed to the kitchen. I poured myself a glass of barley tea, then returned to her room. Setting the cup down on the table, I wandered over to her bookshelf.

There, sitting on one of the shelves, was the stuffed black cat I had given her.

I didn’t know Miyagi all that well, but I did know this bookshelf was filled with things she liked. The fact that the stuffed black cat had its own spot here meant she cherished it more than I expected.

I picked it up and ran my fingers over its head.

「Good for you, huh?」

It wasn’t alive, of course, but it felt better to see it treated with care than to imagine it being tossed aside.

I leaned forward and kissed the tip of its nose before returning it to its place on the shelf.

In any case, there wasn’t much for me to do.

I didn’t feel like reading, and I didn’t really want to watch anything either.

After finishing my cup of barley tea, I decided to put my time to better use. Acting like a diligent student preparing for entrance exams, I spread my textbooks and notebooks across the table. It was certainly more productive than aimlessly wandering around Miyagi’s room.

As I flipped through reference books and worked through problems, I felt far more at ease than I had in the bath. I stayed focused, letting the steady rhythm of studying occupy my mind until

Miyagi returned, marking the start of our study session.

「You're not wearing any makeup, huh.」

She said softly as she glanced at me.

「Well, I did just take a bath.」

Since I was planning to sleep right after we finished studying, there didn't seem to be any point in putting my makeup back on. Even so, I couldn't help but wonder what Miyagi thought of me like this. She didn't say anything else, leaving me guessing.

The room grew quiet, filled only with the overly loud sounds of pages turning and pencils scribbling against paper.

We didn't talk except for when I answered Miyagi's questions about our homework.

But just because it was quiet didn't mean we were fully focused. I couldn't deny I was at least a little conscious of her sitting beside me, and I doubted Miyagi was entirely absorbed in her work either.

Still, somehow, two hours passed while we studied.

「Let's go to sleep.」

Miyagi said suddenly.

With exams approaching, it felt like we hadn't done enough. But since I couldn't concentrate anyway, there was no point in continuing. Deciding I'd make up for it later, I began packing up my reference books and notebooks.

「Come with me, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi said as she stood, dressed in a similar—but not identical—set of sweats.

「Oh, sure. What are we doing?」

「We have a futon for guests to use in another room.」

I immediately understood what she meant.

There was only one bed in this room.

「… And that's what I'll be sleeping on?」

「Yeah. Come help me get it.」

「Okay.」

Well, this wasn't exactly surprising.

It was perfectly normal for a guest to sleep on a futon when staying over at someone's house. In that sense, having me use the guest futon wasn't strange at all. And realistically, there was no way Miyagi would want me to share the same bed with her.

I followed her out of the room.

Miyagi slid open a door at the back of the living room, revealing a Japanese-style room I hadn't seen before. She walked to the closet, pulled out a futon, and we carried it together back to her room, spreading it out on the floor.

「I'm going to turn off the lights now.」

Her voice was cold as I placed my phone next to my pillow. Before I could say anything, the lights went out, plunging the room into darkness.

「Good night.」

I said in the pitch-black room, where even the faintest glow of night lights was absent.

「… Good night.」

She replied quietly, and the room fell silent.

Something about the stillness felt off. This didn't feel like the same room I'd been in so many times before. Even lying on my back, I couldn't shake the discomfort. It was as though something was sticking to me, and if I had to guess, it was probably because I was still wearing Miyagi's sweatshirt.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to let the unease dissolve into the darkness.

—— But just as I expected, I couldn't fall asleep.

I opened and closed my eyes again, then rolled over a few times, but nothing helped. Sleep was nowhere to be found. If I tried counting sheep right now, I was sure I'd hit 10,000 and still be awake. Normally, I wasn't the type to lose sleep just because I wasn't in my own bed, but tonight, I wouldn't be surprised if I stayed awake until morning.

I reached for my phone and checked the time. Barely ten minutes had passed since I last looked.

「Are you still awake?」

I called out to Miyagi, wondering if she was in the same sleepless boat as me, but there was no response.

「Miyagi, you're awake, aren't you?」

I tried again, speaking a little louder this time.

It's not fair if she's the only one who can fall asleep.

That thought spurred me to call out again, louder this time. Still, there was no response. My eyes, still adjusting to the dark, guided me as I made my way to her bed.

「If you're just pretending to be asleep, give it up already.」

I thought calling her name might get her to move, but Miyagi didn't even flinch.

Reaching out, my hand brushed against something soft—her cheek. I let my fingers trace the shape of her face, then moved to her hair, its dark strands smooth beneath my touch. I tugged gently at what I assumed were her bangs, but still, she didn't react.

「… Shiori.」

I whispered her name close to her ear. That finally made her

shift, pulling back from me.

「Don’t call me by my name.」

Her voice sounded irritated, cutting through the dark like a sharp blade.

「So you were awake.」

「You’re the one who woke me up.」

Miyagi sat up, turning on a small night light that cast a soft glow over the room.

「Keep me company for a little while. I can’t fall asleep.」

Without waiting for her reply, I sat down on her bed. There wasn’t much we could talk about, but even small talk was better than staring into the dark, counting imaginary sheep.

「I don’t want to. And this is my territory, so don’t sit here.」

Her hands pushed against my shoulders, forcing me back.

「Your ‘territory’? That sounds like something a grade school student would say.」

「It doesn’t matter. Just get off and go back to your own territory.」

「And where exactly is that?」

「Over there.」

She pointed toward the futon, and I stood up without complaint.

「Fine, fine. I’ll go back to my own territory.」

I stepped back over to the futon and slipped beneath the covers.

Miyagi and I were different.

I was the one who always wanted to kiss her, to touch her. Honestly, I still felt that way even now. I couldn't believe she didn't feel the same, but whatever she felt was undoubtedly different from what I did. Maybe she only had those urges half as often as me—or far less than half.

「Okay, I'll try to sleep now. Good night.」

I rolled over, closing my eyes in an effort to suppress the feelings that had grown too loud to ignore.

「Didn't you just say you couldn't sleep?」

Her voice made me open my eyes again, and I turned towards her bed.

「Yeah, but I'm going to try anyway.」

「Why the sudden change?」

Despite her earlier refusal to keep me company, Miyagi sounded almost like she didn't want me to sleep now.

If she'd stayed quiet, I might've managed to drift off eventually, but now that she was talking to me, my fleeting drowsiness slipped even further out of reach.

「I just don't want to betray your trust.」

I answered with my eyes closed.

「What does that even mean?」

「You let me stay the night because you trusted me not to do anything strange, right?」

「Yep.」

「Yeah, so, good night.」

I wasn't even remotely sleepy, but I cut the conversation short anyway. When Miyagi called out, "Sendai-san," I didn't respond. Instead, I turned my back to the bed, only to hear the soft rustle of movement behind me.

The futon dipped slightly at its edge, and I sat up. Turning toward the sound, I could make out Miyagi's form in the faint light.

「This is supposed to be my territory.」

Miyagi, who had just kicked me back into this so-called "territory" earlier, was now seated at the edge of the futon herself.

「Well, the whole room is my domain, so technically, this is my territory too.」

Claiming the futon as hers now, Miyagi pulled the comforter away from me. The room was warm enough that I didn't exactly need it, but I wasn't about to let her take over without a fight.

「That's not fair. You didn't say anything like this before.」

「I'm the one letting you stay over, so I think it's fine if I'm a little unfair.」

Without waiting for a rebuttal, Miyagi shifted closer, settling herself beside me. Then, her hand brushed lightly against my collarbone.

Miyagi's In A Bad Mood Even During Winter Break (III)

Part 102

I had been the one thinking about how much I wanted to touch Miyagi.

But I never expected her to be the one to touch me first.

I tensed at the feeling of her hand brushing against my collarbone.

「It's your fault for waking me up, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi murmured, as if making an excuse, while her fingers traced the outline of my collarbone. They drifted lower and lower until they reached the collar of my sweatshirt. Then, as though uncertain about what to do next, her hand stopped.

I grabbed her wrist, intending to pull it away, but before I could, her fingertips pressed firmly against my skin.

「Sendai-san, let go.」

Her tone was the same one she used when giving me orders in her room.

I knew what she was after.

She wanted to check if I was wearing the pendant, though I couldn't guess her exact reasons for wanting to do it herself.

「What are you going to do once I let go?」

I'd promised to show her the pendant whenever she asked. Even now, without her offering the usual five-thousand yen, it felt like I didn't have a choice.

「I don't need to tell you anything.」

She replied coldly.

「Then I'm not letting go.」

While I had no issue keeping my promise to show her the pendant, at least tonight, I didn't want her to take it upon herself to check.

「… Let go of me.」

Her voice sounded almost like a plea, and instinctively, I loosened my grip.

Miyagi had never requested anything from me before.

But just now, her tone had come close to it.

「Okay, fine.」

Now that we were in winter break, I wasn't obligated to follow her orders anymore.

But honestly, there wasn't a reason to hold my ground and stubbornly refuse either.

I released her wrist, and her fingers slid behind my neck, brushing against the chain of the pendant. She didn't stroke the chain or slip her hand into my shirt but instead pulled the pendant out from under it.

「So you are keeping your promise.」

Her voice softened slightly as she ran her fingertips along the chain, brushing the crescent moon-shaped charm.

「Well, of course.」

I gave a short reply as she tugged lightly at the charm.

「… Even though you're the type to break your promises.」

「I mean, I do keep some of them. Isn't that good enough?」

「You should be keeping all of them.」

「I'm not confident I can do that.」

I knew I should've reassured her, told her I'd keep all of my promises from now on. But if I did, I wasn't sure what kind of expectations I'd be agreeing to. Miyagi was always so unpredictable—if she pushed me into something unreasonable, I couldn't guarantee I'd follow through.

There were already some promises I couldn't keep, so I didn't want to make more lightly.

「That's one of the things I really don't like about you, Sendai-san.」

Her voice dropped as she let go of the pendant.

「Yeah, I know.」

「I don't like how you say things like that either.」

Her tone grew sharper, almost irritated, and without thinking, I grabbed her arm.

The physical distance between us hadn't changed.

But somehow, Miyagi felt further away than ever.

Something was different tonight.

I wasn't sure what exactly, but I knew I had made some kind of mistake.

I should've said I'd keep all my promises, even if I wasn't confident I could.

I should've said it, even if I didn't fully understand the weight of those words.

「I'm going to sleep now.」

Miyagi tried to stand, but my hand remained on her arm. I instinctively tightened my grip.

「Ow.」

「Stay up with me a bit longer.」

If I let Miyagi go to sleep now, it felt like she'd only drift further away from me.

「No.」

She answered curtly, trying to forcefully peel my hand away.

Her nails dug into the back of my hand so deeply it felt like they might break the skin. The sharp pain made me tug hard on Miyagi's arm. I didn't mean to be rough, but the sudden pull caused her to lose her balance, and she grabbed onto my shoulders to steady herself.

「Hey, that was dangerous!」

Miyagi snapped, though she remained tucked in my arms.

Taking advantage of how close we were, I leaned toward her, bringing my lips near hers.

We were so close our breaths seemed to mix, but Miyagi didn't move.

So, without further hesitation, I pressed my lips to hers.

I'd lost track of how many times we'd kissed already, but my heart still skipped a beat. I felt like I could hear the sound of it pounding in my chest. As I pressed my lips firmly against hers, I could feel their softness so vividly that even with my eyes closed, I could trace their outline in my mind.

But soon, I felt her hands on my shoulders, pushing me away. Her lips—which felt softer than the black cat plush—parted from mine.

「Sendai-san, didn't you say you wouldn't do anything strange today?」

Miyagi muttered as she slipped out of my arms.

「I mean, I helped you study earlier, and we had an agreement, didn't we? I was just exercising my rights.」

Before winter break, I had asked for kissing to be included as part of our deal. I hadn't planned on invoking that right tonight—I was determined to honor my promise not to do anything strange.

But Miyagi hadn't pulled away. She let me kiss her.

That alone made me feel like I could get away with doing it again.

I reached out, brushing my fingertips lightly against her lips.

Before I could move in for another kiss, though, she grabbed my hand and pushed me down onto the futon.

The fall didn't hurt, but that didn't make what she did feel any more acceptable.

「The fact that you tried to do that just now must mean that this is okay too, right?」

Miyagi said, her voice coming from above me.

By "this," there was only one thing she could possibly mean.

But this was exactly the sort of "strange thing" she had made me promise not to do.

As I wrestled with whether to accept the situation, Miyagi grabbed the hem of my sweatshirt.

「Wait, Miyagi. I didn't say it was okay.」

「Then just tell me it is.」

Her voice sounded so grumpy it was hard to believe she was about to do something "strange" to me. I wasn't expecting sweet words from Miyagi, but her tone was sharper than usual, brimming with irritation.

「No, I won't.」

To begin with, this was exactly the sort of thing I had promised I wouldn't do today.

I slapped away her hand, which was still gripping the hem of my sweatshirt, and told her to let go. Instead, her hand slipped under my clothes and brushed against my side.

「Miyagi, wait.」

「This is your fault for breaking your promise, Sendai-san. You said you wouldn't do anything weird.」

「But kissing was part of our agreement, wasn't it?」

All I had done was invoke the right to something we had agreed upon before the start of winter break. Yet, Miyagi didn't stop her hand.

Her fingertips slowly trailed upward from my side.

「But that wasn't the right time for a kiss. If all you wanted was to collect your end of the bargain, you should've done it right after we finished studying.」

「We never specified anything about when I could kiss you.」

Miyagi's hand came to a halt, and her gaze locked onto mine, sharp enough to pierce through the dimly lit room.

「—— I really can't trust you after all.」

She murmured softly, rolling up my sweatshirt to just below my chest.

Showing my stomach wasn't a big deal.

It was dark enough that it probably wasn't very visible, and Miyagi had seen it several times before. Yet, with nothing shielding it now, I felt oddly defenseless.

Miyagi placed her hand next to my belly button.

The warmth of her entire palm pressed firmly against my skin,

spreading upward toward my ribs. Her hand moved hesitantly, tickling more than it felt good, but not enough for me to push her away, so I decided it was fine to stay under Miyagi a little longer. Still, I hesitated about letting her hand move any further.

I knew where her hand was heading, and it was probably best to stop her now.

After all, we had promised not to do anything like this today.

「Miyagi.」

But instead of grabbing her hand, I called out her name.

The heat of her touch disappeared from my skin, only to return moments later, this time just below my chest.

「That's still on, huh.」

Miyagi muttered to herself.

Though she hadn't said what was still on, I knew immediately she meant my undergarments.

「Well, of course. I'm at someone else's house, after all.」

「… Can I take it off?」

Miyagi asked, like she was testing me, as she placed her hand over my chest. Her movements were subtle, as if tracing its shape through the fabric.

Even with a layer of clothing between us, I could still feel the warmth of her hand, every touch registering on my skin.

I couldn't tell if the sensation was pleasant or not, but a soft breath escaped my lips.

Her fingertips brushed against the strap of my bra, pausing there.

It seemed like she wouldn't go any further without my consent, and my body tensed in response.

I hadn't expected that the very person who made me promise not to do anything strange would now be the one pushing those boundaries herself.

The choice was now mine, as Miyagi silently awaited my response.

I reached out and let my hand graze her cheek, my fingers gently stroking her chin before pinching her earlobe.

A small breath escaped Miyagi, as if she was being tickled by my touch.

「Sendai-san.」

Miyagi's voice called out to me, urging for an answer.

I wanted her touch, just as much as I wanted to touch her in return.

The choice between "yes" and "no" became a tangled mess in my mind.

「—— If you're prepared to face what comes next, then go ahead and do as you please.」

Even though I wasn't the one crossing the line with Miyagi, somehow it felt like I was about to break my promise to her.

It felt as if some invisible counter kept track of every promise I broke, and once I hit its limit, Miyagi would drift away to somewhere I couldn't reach. But I didn't know how far that limit stretched or how many more promises I could afford to break.

So, I left the final decision in Miyagi's hands.

「"Prepared"? For what?」

「You know I'm not exactly rational about these things, right?」

Mimicking her earlier actions, I slipped my hand beneath her sweatshirt, brushing against her side.

「… And what's that supposed to mean?」

「You already know what I mean, don't you?」

Miyagi remained silent.

「If you really don't understand, I don't mind showing you, but are you sure you're okay with that, Miyagi?」

I knew my question was unfair, the way it cornered her.

My hand traveled upward, tracing the curve of her spine.

Miyagi flinched, withdrawing her hand from my chest before quickly standing up.

Miyagi was a lot more rational than I was. Instead of letting herself drown in her desires, she was always able to swim to shore and then pull me out with her.

「That's enough.」

Miyagi said, taking a seat next to me as she straightened out her rumpled clothes.

「Yeah, this is probably for the best.」

I replied, sitting up and adjusting my own disheveled clothes.

If things had continued like that, I might've been kicked out of her house in the middle of the night. It felt exactly like something Miyagi would do, so stopping when we did seemed like the right choice.

Even so, I wasn't ready to let Miyagi return to her bed just yet.

I reached out and grabbed the hand beside me.

「Miyagi.」

I called her name softly, and she turned to face me.

Leaning in, I pressed my lips to hers.

This time, she didn't push me away by the shoulders or dig her nails into my hand.

That told me she wasn't opposed to this.

Slowly, I pulled back.

「Look, that kiss just now was part of our agreement, okay? You're not going to say I did something strange to you again, are you?」

Miyagi didn't respond. Instead, she slipped her hand away and brushed her fingers against the pendant still visible on my chest.

「I'm going to collect on my end of the bargain a little more, so don't get mad at me, okay?」

I said, just to be sure.

It was better safe than sorry, after all.

After giving her a heads-up, I leaned in and kissed her again.

Chapter 33

Sendai-san is Never Kind (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 103

Sendai-san was right—we had an agreement from before winter break started.

If she wanted to kiss me, I was supposed to let her.

While the best time for that would've been right after we finished studying—and not right now—I decided to make an exception and let her kiss me anyway.

But this was far beyond what I'd imagined.

I didn't mind if she went a little beyond what was agreed upon, but Sendai-san was taking things way too far.

She kissed me once after telling me not to get mad, then kissed me several more times after that. And even then, with a look on her face that said she still wasn't satisfied, she leaned in again.

Before her lips could reach mine, I pressed my hand against her forehead.

「Sendai-san.」

I pushed her face away, adding force to my hand as she leaned closer.

But she pulled my hand aside, and before I could say anything, she kissed me again.

Her lips felt familiar—the same softness and warmth I'd felt before. We separated, only to press our lips together again immediately after.

Sendai-san's lips felt good.

When I'd touched her earlier, my heart felt like it was going to burst.

Now, everything seemed to be moving twice as fast as usual, leaving me no time to catch my breath.

My hands and face burned hot, and I felt like I wasn't myself.

Though my heart was still racing, it wasn't as wild as before. It gave me enough time to notice how clearly I could feel her warmth and softness.

But this needed to stop before things went any further.

I pushed Sendai-san away by the shoulders, creating distance between us.

「Even if this was part of our agreement, you're overdoing it. You're kissing me way too much.」

I protested, but she placed a finger against my lips.

「Well, you never said how many kisses I was allowed to give you.」

「Fine, then let's set a limit right now.」

「Sure, but it only counts starting next time.」

Sendai-san brushed off my suggestion, her voice calm in the dim room, before pressing her lips to mine again—and again.

She kissed me so many times that I eventually gave up on keeping track. Each kiss was quick, like a fleeting touch. Maybe she was trying to avoid doing anything "weird," but it felt like she wasn't being herself.

The Sendai-san I knew was forceful and erotic—not this careful, kind version of her who kissed me so lightly. She was being unusually gentle, offering only soft, fleeting pecks. It wasn't that I was unsatisfied, but her tenderness was throwing me off. It was making me feel like it might be okay if she pushed things a little

further.

—— No, this isn't right.

If I kept letting her get away with this, we'd inevitably cross some kind of line. And besides, Sendai-san wasn't the type to be gentle without a reason.

「If you keep going, I'm really going to get angry.」

I cut in during the brief moment our lips parted, stopping her before she could lean in again.

「Come on, just a little more is fine, isn't it?」

「No, it's not fine. Your idea of 'a little' is way too much, Sendai-san.」

「You're so stingy.」

「Call it what you want, but stop.」

I backed away, putting distance between us. Then, I reached over and turned off the night light, plunging the room into complete darkness.

「Now, go to sleep already.」

I said, urging her to do what the night was meant for, as I tugged the comforter over her. But with Sendai-san still in the way, it wouldn't settle properly.

「Fine, I'll try to sleep. Go back to your own territory, Miyagi.」

She muttered, a hand reaching out in the dark to nudge me away.

「… No.」

It wasn't often I had someone else here at night, so I wanted to make the most of it.

I was used to being alone, but the nights stretched on

endlessly. Even if I was asleep for most of it, there were times when strange dreams crept in, leaving me disheartened. Tonight, though, knowing there was someone else here—even if that someone was Sendai-san—brought me a quiet sense of relief.

And being closer felt better than staying apart.

The solitude was cold, but with someone by my side, it felt just a bit warmer. For tonight, she'd do just fine as a makeshift heating pad.

I tugged the comforter firmly to my side and slipped into the futon ahead of her.

「Hey, why are you the one sleeping here? If you're going to take the futon, then I'll sleep in your bed instead.」

Rustling sounds came from beside me, and I realized it was Sendai-san trying to get up.

「No, the bed is my territory, so you're not allowed to go there.」

I said, grabbing her arm and pulling her back toward me.

「Even though you're not even sleeping in it?」

「Yeah, it doesn't matter if I'm not sleeping in it. It's still my territory. Yours is here, Sendai-san.」

「Well, if you want us to sleep together, I guess I don't mind.」

「That's not what I meant… but anyway, go grab my pillow from the bed for me.」

「But I can hardly see a thing…」

The room was pitch black with the night light off, so it made sense she couldn't see. Still, Sendai-san had been in my room so many times she should know it by heart.

「Even if you can't see, you should know where the bed is by now.」

「You're so selfish sometimes, Miyagi.」

She replied with an exasperated sigh before leaving my side.

Soon enough, she returned and dropped what I assumed was my pillow onto the futon.

「Move over.」

Sendai-san said, giving me a gentle push.

I fumbled around, dragging the pillow closer to create space. She adjusted the comforter slightly before slipping into the futon beside me.

「It's so cramped.」

She complained, her voice tinged with dissatisfaction, as she lightly kicked my calf.

If I moved any farther toward the edge, I'd be sticking out of the covers, so instead, I turned my back to her and closed my eyes.

「What are you trying to get out of this?」

She asked, her voice quieter now, as she poked lightly at my back.

「What? I can sleep wherever I want.」

I replied, pulling more of the comforter over to my side as I curled up.

「Hey, stop hogging it. It's cold.」

I heard her voice grumble softly from behind me, but I stayed silent. Instead of tugging at the comforter, I felt her fingers pulling lightly at the fabric of my sweatshirt. Her palms pressed gently against my back. Even through the layer of fabric, it felt oddly ticklish, but at the same time, it was a warm and comforting sensation.

As her warmth spread through me, I suddenly remembered

the feel of her own body beneath her sweatshirt.

At the time, I thought that touching Sendai-san would make me trust her words and erase all my worries. But instead of easing my mind, my anxiety only intensified.

Even though I could see the necklace on her with my own eyes, proof she was keeping her promise, I couldn't shake the doubt that she might not keep it forever.

Even now, with her right beside me, close enough to reach out and touch, I felt that if I turned toward her, she might disappear somewhere far away, beyond my reach.

I curled up tighter, gripping the edge of the comforter.

Closing my eyes firmly, the warmth against my back began to feel faint, as if it might vanish entirely. A sense of loneliness crept in, tightening my shoulders and arms.

「Miyagi.」

A soft voice called my name, and the hand resting against my back gave my sweatshirt another small tug.

I had a strange feeling she was about to say my first name, so I quickly spoke up to stop her before she could.

「If you call me "Shiori," I'll kick you out immediately.」

Calling someone by their first name was an ordinary thing, nothing inherently special. Yet, when it came to Sendai-san, hearing her say mine felt different—it felt significant, so I didn't want her to.

「But you don't mind me calling you "Miyagi," do you?」

She asked, and then, softly, she repeated it.

"Miyagi."

"Miyagi, Miyagi."

She said it again and again, the sound of her voice slowly unraveling the tension in my body.

「Be quiet, Sendai-san. Just go to sleep already.」

“Okay,” she said lightly, though instead of sleeping, her hand moved to my hair.

She gently ran her fingers through it, stroking softly, like she was combing it over and over.

The gentle touch of her soft hands and the warmth they carried made my eyelids grow heavier little by little. My body slowly uncurled, relaxing with each passing moment. Then, with a quiet “Good night,” she withdrew her hand.

Sendai-san is Never Kind (II)

Part 104

I had forgotten to set an alarm.

I couldn't remember setting one before falling asleep, and yet, I woke up on my own. As I shifted around, I noticed Sendai-san lying right next to me.

「… Why?」

I closed my eyes, then opened them wide, confirming what I saw. Sendai-san was right there, sleeping peacefully in front of me.

Still groggy, I tried piecing things together.

Yesterday, Sendai-san came over, we had dinner, and she stayed the night.

That much was clear—it had all really happened.

But there was one memory I didn't want to acknowledge.

——The reason why Sendai-san was sleeping beside me.

It was because I had climbed into the futon I had laid out for her and fallen asleep there of my own accord.

「My whole body feels so sore.」

Probably because we'd crammed ourselves into a futon way too small for two people. My joints ached as I sighed and reached out to gently tug at her bangs.

「Mmnn…」

Her lips moved slightly, letting out a soft, incoherent noise, but she didn't wake up.

I touched her cheek with my fingertip, tracing it down to her

chin. She stayed perfectly still, fast asleep.

「… Hazuki.」

I gently called her name, but there was no reply. I picked up a strand of her long, light brown hair—a color she'd always gotten away with at school despite it being against the rules—and brought it closer, brushing my lips against it.

I hadn't noticed yesterday, but her hair was incredibly soft and smelled just like mine.

As I let the strand of her hair slip away from my lips, I shifted closer to Sendai-san.

It wasn't just her hair. Her whole body smelled exactly like mine.

I was the only one who knew this side of Sendai-san—the side of her that was wearing my clothes and carried my scent. It felt like this version of her belonged to me alone. But I doubted I'd ever get the chance to see her sleeping like this again.

Reaching out, I brushed my fingers against the chain of the necklace peeking out from her sweatshirt.

The end of our arrangement was drawing near.

Winter break would soon be over, and before long, our entrance exams would pass too. Graduation was only a few torn calendar pages away.

And when that day came, my high school life would be over, whether I was ready for it or not.

I let out a quiet sigh.

As my fingertips traced the chain, Sendai-san stirred slightly, making my heart skip a beat. I quickly withdrew my hand and slipped out of the futon as quietly as I could.

I changed my clothes in near silence and headed to the kitchen.

Even without needing to look, I already knew what was in the refrigerator. Still, I opened it, and as expected, there was hardly anything inside.

I pulled out a few slices of bread from the freezer and slid them into the toaster. After setting out plates and cups, I grabbed a carton of orange juice from the refrigerator. Before I even had the chance to call Sendai-san over, she appeared in the kitchen.

「Good morning. What are you up to?」

She asked in a drowsy voice, still dressed in my set of sweats as her eyes shifted to the toaster.

「Good morning. Can't you tell what I'm doing just by looking?」

「If I had to guess, you're probably making us breakfast?」

「Not "probably." That is what I'm doing.」

「… Miyagi… You know I still have prep school later, right? I don't know what I'm going to do if it starts snowing all of a sudden.」

「Look, if you don't want to eat it, just say so.」

I said, lightly kicking her foot for teasing me as I placed the freshly toasted bread on the plates.

「I'm just joking around. Can I go get changed first?」

She tugged at the hem of her sweatshirt.

「No. The bread's already toasted.」

I placed the plates on the counter table and went back to grab the orange juice and some butter. For some reason, Sendai-san was following right behind me, peeking into the refrigerator.

「Surely you've got some jam in there, right?」

She asked, leaning close enough that her voice tickled my ear, and I pushed her head away.

「Yeah, but it might be expired.」

「Seriously?」

「Well, we have butter, so it should be fine.」

I handed her the container I'd taken from the refrigerator, but she looked more disappointed than necessary.

「It tastes better with both, though.」

「You'll put on a lot of weight like that.」

「I guess you have a point. Anyway, what's the expiration date on the jam?」

She asked, and I glanced at the date printed on the bottle.

「Looks like it's fine. Just barely, though.」

I handed her the bottle of jam and shut the refrigerator door. While I poured orange juice into our cups, Sendai-san placed the butter and jam on the counter table and sat down. I brought the cups over and set them beside her.

「Let's eat.」

We said in unison as we looked at our modest breakfast. I spread butter on my toast while Sendai-san took a bite of hers, which was layered with both butter and jam. Then, she glanced over at me.

「You should try putting some on, too.」

She slid the bottle of jam towards me.

It wasn't like I'd never seen bread with both butter and jam sold in stores before, but it wasn't something I ever did myself. Butter was butter, and jam was jam. Some things were better left separate.

But the expectant look in Sendai-san's eyes wore me down. With a small sigh, I spread a thin layer of jam over my buttered

toast and took a bite.

The crust gave a satisfying crunch, and the creamy butter blended with the sweet strawberry flavor. Bite by bite, the salty richness of the butter and the fruity sweetness of the jam came together perfectly.

「It's pretty delicious, right?」

「Yeah, more than I expected it to be.」

Maybe I'll add a bit of jam next time, too.

「I'm glad you think that.」

Sendai-san smiled softly, taking a sip of orange juice from her glass.

Thinking back, Sendai-san and I had once made French toast together during summer break. That wasn't the only time, either—she'd cooked plenty of meals here before. Somewhere along the line, Sendai-san and food had become deeply connected in my mind.

Sharing meals like this had become so normal that the thought of eating alone again felt unbearably dull. I'd been eating by myself for years, both in the mornings and at night, but now, because of Sendai-san, I found myself dreading the idea of returning to those lonely routines.

I drained the last of my orange juice and finished the rest of my toast. The flavors of the butter, jam, and slightly burnt crust blended in a way that felt oddly comforting, as if filling a small emptiness inside me.

「I'll take care of the dishes, so go ahead and get changed.」

I said while gathering up the plates and cups.

「Hmm… it really feels like it's going to snow today.」

「If you hate the idea of getting changed so much, just go home wearing those clothes.」

「There's still plenty of time before I need to leave, but fine,

I'll go.」

Sendai-san popped the last bite of toast into her mouth and stood up. She headed toward my bedroom, leaving me alone.

I carried the dishes she'd used over to the sink and turned on the hot water. As I scrubbed them with a soapy sponge, my eyes drifted to the clock.

Just a few more hours left.

It felt like no time at all had passed since she arrived yesterday, yet in a few short hours, I'd be on my own again. The thought of spending tonight without the person who had been by my side all last night left me with a faint sense of loneliness.

I'd known she had prep school today, and there was no chance she'd stay over another night. I understood that perfectly, yet the uneasy feeling of her leaving soon refused to go away.

After finishing the dishes, I shut off the water and headed back to my room.

When I returned, Sendai-san was sitting at the table with her makeup done, as if she'd been waiting for me.

「There's still some time left, so why don't we study for a bit?」

She asked, spreading her textbooks across the table.

「Sure, but…」

「But?」

「No kisses today.」

I answered as I took a seat next to her, and Sendai-san stared at me with a puzzled look.

「Why not?」

She asked, even though she likely already knew the reason.

She had kissed me so many times yesterday – excusing it as part of our trade agreement for helping me study – that letting her cash in on the deal again felt like pushing things too far.

「There's a limit to how much is allowed. Whatever you did yesterday also counts for today.」

「I don't remember hearing anything about this. So, how much is the limit, then?」

「I'm not going to tell you.」

「Why not? How am I supposed to know if I've stayed within the limit or not?」

「I'll let you know when enough is enough.」

I placed my textbooks on the table, turning my gaze down to the pages filled with tiny letters.

Truthfully, I hadn't even set a concrete limit myself, so I couldn't answer her question. And even if I had, Sendai-san would have ignored it immediately, making it pointless to establish one in the first place. Besides, if she tried kissing me like she had yesterday, I had a gut feeling things wouldn't stop there, and that made me all the more against it.

「You're pretty selfish sometimes, you know that, Miyagi?」

「The same goes for you, Sendai-san.」

I said without looking at her, and she replied with, "Well, I guess I won't deny that." And then, the conversation came to an abrupt end.

We continued studying in silence, and before long, the afternoon arrived. We had lunch together, and soon it was time for Sendai-san to leave. I could hear her say that it was time to go.

「I'll walk you downstairs.」

I offered as she grabbed her coat and bag.

「It's really cold today. You don't have to.」

「It's fine. I'm coming right back up anyway.」

I pulled a down jacket from the closet and slipped it on, and Sendai-san gave a small nod, saying, "Okay, let's go then."

We made our way down the hallway of the apartment building and stepped into the elevator.

When we opened the door to the outside, a cold gust of wind rushed in. I reflexively pulled my neck in, hearing a voice from behind me.

「It's so cold…」

When I stepped outside, the cold hit me harder than I had expected. I couldn't see my breath, but the sun and clouds could still be seen in the distance. The pale blue sky stretched endlessly, like an iceberg looming overhead, and just looking at it made me shiver.

「Here's fine. Thanks for letting me stay over yesterday.」

Sendai-san tucked her hands into her coat pockets and took a step back.

「I'll get going now.」

Usually, we'd part ways like this, and I'd head back upstairs to my apartment.

But this time, before she could walk away, my hand moved on its own to grab her arm.

「Miyagi?」

I didn't have anything to say, really. My hand had just acted on its own, and now, I was at a loss for words. I just stared at Sendai-san, not wanting to let go.

「I'm going to be late for prep school, you know.」

Sendai-san pulled her hands out of her pockets, then took hold of my hand, still resting on her arm.

「Didn't you say you were going to be late?」

「Yeah, so I'm leaving now.」

She said, sounding as if she were about to turn away, but she didn't—nor did she let go of my hand.

「I guess the next time I'll see you is when the new year comes, right?」

Sendai-san murmured as she tightened her grip on my hand.

「Yeah, that's the plan. I'll let you know when I need you to come over and help me study.」

「Okay.」

She let go of my hand with that simple response.

Sendai-san was always so unkind.

I'd always known that, but to her, things like studying and prep school were far more important to her—at least more so than I was. Now, she was about to leave me here in my apartment, alone again.

「I'll see you later, then.」

She began walking away, her figure retreating.

「Yeah, see you.」

I waved my hand weakly in reply.

As her back grew smaller in the distance, a sense of isolation crept over me. I was used to being alone, but the idea of returning to my room—where Sendai-san had kept me company the whole time—felt overwhelmingly depressing.

Sendai-san is Never Kind (III)

Part 105

"Happy New Year."

When I woke up and reached for my phone beside my pillow, I saw messages from Maika and Ami. I sent them the same New Year's greetings in return.

There was nothing from Sendai-san.

No messages, no calls.

She hadn't bothered to text or call to welcome the new year—not that I had either. But it would've been nice if she had at least tried.

I lay there, staring at my screen.

But still, no calls came in.

「Whatever. It doesn't matter.」

Sendai-san wasn't here today, but I wasn't alone either. My father, who was rarely home, had decided to spend the day here, and we planned to have dinner together.

As a child, I loved New Year's Eve and New Year's Day because they meant my father would be home. Once I entered middle school, it stopped feeling like such a special occasion, but even then, it was still reassuring to know someone else was around. Yet now, instead of thinking about dinner with my father, I found myself more preoccupied with my phone—where Sendai-san's name remained absent from my notifications.

Rolling onto my side, I ran my fingers over the head of the black cat plushie next to my pillow before setting my phone down beside it. Then, I pulled myself out of bed.

After stretching, I left my room, brushed my teeth, got

dressed, and made my way to the living room.

My father and I exchanged New Year's greetings before sitting down for breakfast together.

The hours slipped by faster than they did on school days, yet the day still felt long with nothing much happening. I opened my reference books and sat at my desk, and before I knew it, evening had arrived.

By the time I finished dinner, I realized all I had done today was study. My phone—still watched over by the black cat plush—had received a few more messages, but they were all from Maika and Ami. Nothing from Sendai-san.

Just because it was New Year's Day didn't mean anything out of the ordinary would happen. Aside from getting more studying done, today was no different from the day before, despite being a new year. And just like yesterday, I went to bed a little earlier than usual.

The next day came, and nothing changed.

I woke up to an empty apartment, spent the day alone, and before I knew it, night had fallen.

When I glanced at the clock, I saw it was already past ten, so I decided to get ready for bed.

Now, I was alone in the room where I had slept beside Sendai-san just a few short days ago.

I wasn't particularly lonely.

Just bored.

I pulled the black cat plush close, tugging at its ears. It didn't meow, of course—but something else did make a sound.

It was my phone.

I picked it up from my pillow and glanced at the screen. It was a message from Sendai-san.

『Are you alone right now?』

It wasn't a New Year's greeting, making it hard to believe that the new year had begun at all.

I typed out a quick reply.

『I am. Why?』

Almost immediately after, my phone started ringing.

Sendai-san was calling me.

I hesitated.

I could've answered right away, but I didn't want to seem like I'd been waiting for her to call. So, I let it ring a few more times before finally sitting up and picking up.

「Hello?」

「Happy New Year.」

Her voice was close—so close it felt like she was right next to me.

It reminded me of that night, when we slept in the same futon.

Back then, her voice had been just as close.

My grip on my phone tightened.

It was just a phone call.

Nothing to get worked up over.

「… Happy New Year.」

I said the words I never got to tell her last year. Then, I waited for her to say something, but she remained quiet.

「Did you need something?」

I had no choice but to break the silence.

「I was wondering when it was okay to come over.」

「I told you I'd let you know when I decided on a day.」

「I'm asking because I haven't heard anything from you yet.」

「If I haven't said anything, that means I haven't decided. Just wait a little longer.」

New Year's Eve and New Year's Day weren't days to invite someone over just to study. I at least had that much common sense. Today was only the second day of the year—New Year's festivities were still going on. Calling her over now felt wrong. And yet, here she was, making it sound like I was the one at fault for not reaching out sooner.

「At this rate, winter break's going to end before you even make up your mind, so decide right now.」

Sendai-san said in a tone that made it sound like I was the one to blame.

「I have plans too, you know. I can't just decide on the spot.」

That wasn't true. I didn't have any plans.

I just didn't want to decide right now.

If all Sendai-san wanted was to settle on a day to meet, then the call would end the moment we decided.

If that was the case, then maybe it wouldn't hurt to stall a little and talk a bit more.

「Oh, so even you have plans, huh, Miyagi?」

Her tone carried a hint of surprise, and it irritated me more than it should have.

「What, am I not allowed to?」

「Well, no, but… Anyway, what have you been up to since then?」

By “since then,” she probably meant the last time we saw each other.

「Nothing, really.」

「Not even on New Year’s Eve or New Year’s Day?」

「It’s not like there’s anything I need to do on those days.」

「Did you hang out with your friends at all?」

「Sendai-san, you sure ask a lot of questions that sound like something a parent would ask.」

My father never kept tabs on what I did, but sometimes, Sendai-san did—like one of those parents in manga or on TV. I didn’t particularly mind, but it wasn’t like I had anything interesting to tell her anyway.

「Come on, it’s fine if I ask, right? It’s not like we have much else to talk about. So, have you met up with anyone? Like Utsunomiya or anyone else?」

Her voice was unreadable, making it hard to tell if she actually cared about the answer or not.

「I haven’t. Everyone’s busy studying for their entrance exams this time of year anyway. Anyway, I’m sure you didn’t go out with your friends either—」

I was about to finish my sentence when I suddenly remembered the plans she’d told me about before. But before I could correct myself, Sendai-san mentioned Ibaraki-san’s name.

「I went to the shrine with Umina and the others for hatsumode and made some prayers for success.」

It was a name I didn’t want to hear, and I flopped onto the bed, reaching for the black cat plush and pinching its ears.

「I prayed for your sake too, Miyagi.」

「You didn’t have to do that.」

「But you didn't go for hatsumode this year, right?」

She spoke as if it were obvious, and I stroked the plush's head.

「Yeah, since I don't really believe in those sorts of things.」

「I don't really believe in them either, but you know, it's the thought that counts, right?」

Sendai-san didn't seem like the type to pray for success. If she had time to rely on a deity, she'd probably spend it studying instead. If she had gone to the shrine on her own, I might've appreciated the thought, but she hadn't—she was there with Ibaraki-san. That made her words feel empty. Still, if I brushed her off any further, I'd feel bad, so I let the conversation drop. But with that, I had nothing else to say.

「So, have you decided on a day yet?」

Sendai-san brought up the study plans again, reviving our dying conversation.

「Do you have time the day after tomorrow?」

「The day after tomorrow? Not tomorrow?」

「Yeah.」

「I'll probably be free in the evening.」

「Okay, then come the day after tomorrow.」

「Is there a reason you don't want me to come tomorrow instead?」

「It's only the third day after the new year, after all.」

Given her family situation, I doubted the first few days of the new year held much significance for her, but I still wanted to be considerate.

「You care about something like that?」

「I don’t, but you probably need time to study on your own too, don’t you?」

She paused before replying with, “I guess so. Okay, I’ll come the day after tomorrow, then,” and hung up shortly after.

The voice that had felt so close didn’t just grow distant—it vanished completely. With no one left to talk to, the room felt too quiet, and a sense of loneliness crept in.

Winter break was incredibly short.

Once the day after the tomorrow was over, there probably wouldn’t be another chance to meet before it ended. Both of us had entrance exams to focus on. I didn’t want to be the reason Sendai-san failed, and even though I didn’t have to go to the same university as Maika, I’d rather pass than fail. If exams weren’t looming over us, I could’ve called her over more often.

Last year, I had no trouble calling her over whenever I wanted. Then again, we had agreed not to meet over breaks, so it wouldn’t have been possible anyway. Yet, I still found myself thinking about how nice it would’ve been.

Winter break really is boring.

I couldn’t help but let out a heavy sigh.

Sendai-san is Never Kind (IV)

Part 106

It hadn't been long since I'd last seen Sendai-san. We had even talked on the phone the day before yesterday.

Yet, when she stepped through the front door, she greeted me with, "It's been a while," as she slipped off her shoes. Then, as if repeating what she had already said over the phone, she added, "Happy New Year." Out of obligation, I echoed the words back.

「Wait for me in my room.」

I told her, watching as she shrugged off her coat, then headed to the kitchen.

Pulling out a plate and some cookies, I found myself thinking —

It really hadn't been that long since we'd last met, so why did it feel like it had?

Her words, "It's been a while," were nothing special. Just a simple greeting. But somehow, they weighed on me, sitting heavy on my shoulders like an unshakable burden. A phrase so ordinary shouldn't have felt so significant.

I opened the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of soda and some barley tea.

Maybe I was just overthinking it. Maybe I was the one making those words feel like they mattered more than they should.

After pouring the drinks into cups, I put the bottles back and returned to the room, balancing a tray with the plate and cups. Sendai-san was already waiting, her reference books spread open across the table. I set the tray down, placing the drinks and snacks wherever there was space.

「Thanks.」

Sendai-san was dressed in a turtleneck sweater and denim pants. A sweater that covered her neck was unusual for her, and she hadn't even tied her hair up. Somehow, she felt like a stranger right now as she looked over at me.

「Aren't you going to sit down?」

I had been standing there, lost in thought, but her voice snapped me out of it. I sat down beside her and absentmindedly fiddled with a button on my blouse when she suddenly called out my name.

「Miyagi, is no one home today either?」

「No.」

「Are your parents at work?」

She asked, picking up a cookie and nibbling on it.

「Yeah.」

「What about tomorrow?」

「Same as today.」

There was nothing more to my answer than that. She had asked casually, as if just making conversation.

Before winter break, I wouldn't have thought twice about it. I could have answered and moved on. But now, things were different. I couldn't believe she was asking without some kind of deeper meaning.

So, before she could say anything else, I spoke first.

「… I'm not letting you stay over again.」

「It's not like I was asking just so I could stay over.」

She denied it immediately, but I wasn't convinced. This time, I was the one to ask a question.

「Then why did you ask?」

「I was just curious since it didn't seem like anyone else was home.」

Sendai-san answered as she tapped the tip of her pencil against my workbook.

「So, are there any questions you don't understand?」

「Yeah.」

「Which ones?」

I could tell she was just trying to change the subject.

Even if Sendai-san hadn't asked with the intention of staying over, her question still felt like it carried some hidden meaning. But I knew that even if I pressed her about it, she wouldn't give me a straight answer. So instead of wasting my time, I just told her which questions in the workbook I didn't understand.

At least when it came to those, she answered honestly.

The room was neither too cold nor too warm—just like the classrooms at school. And listening to Sendai-san explain things was far better than sitting through a teacher's monotone lectures. The quiet atmosphere, combined with the sound of her voice, made me start to feel drowsy.

Studying wasn't fun. But it was definitely more effective with someone else than doing it alone.

That was the only reason I had invited Sendai-san over today—so she could help me with the questions I couldn't solve.

Still, I couldn't help but be aware of the person sitting next to me, and my eyes wandered toward Sendai-san.

Her long hair draped over her shoulders, and for some reason, that annoyed me.

Obviously, her neck—which was usually visible—was completely hidden.

「Don't look at me. Focus on your homework.」

Sendai-san pointed at my notebook as she spoke.

I dropped my gaze like she told me to, and as if to smooth things over, she added, "Let me know if there's anything you don't understand."

Then, silence.

For a long time, the only sounds in the room were the scratch of pencils against paper. At some point, I reached for my cup, only to find the once-cold soda had turned lukewarm. I stared at it, still half full, debating whether to get a fresh pour from the fridge—but in the end, I didn't bother.

Instead, my gaze drifted from the cup back to Sendai-san.

Her turtleneck was in the way.

Because of it, I couldn't see what I wanted to see.

「What's up? Do you want to take a break?」

Noticing my stare, Sendai-san glanced up.

「I don't mind taking a break, but are you okay on time?」

I asked, still looking at her neck.

「Yeah. Okay, let's stop here for now then.」

「I'm going to make something to eat. Are you eating here too, Sendai-san?」

「Sure.」

As she shut her reference book, Sendai-san asked what was for dinner. Instead of answering, I reached toward her neck, still hidden beneath her sweater.

My fingertips brushed against the fabric—only for her to immediately push my hand away.

「Didn't you say you were going to make us something to eat?」

「I changed my mind. I want to rest a little first.」

「If you're taking a break, then rest properly.」

「I was just wondering why you decided to cover up your neck today.」

「You're not actually curious about my neck, are you? There's something else you want to see.」

She turned her whole body toward me, looking slightly annoyed. Then, without warning, she ran her fingers through my hair, trailing them down my neck.

「—— If you already knew what I wanted, then show it to me.」

Sendai-san was being mean.

She knew exactly what I wanted to see, yet she wouldn't say it outright. Worse, she still refused to show me and was touching me instead.

Her fingers moved slowly, sending a ticklish sensation down my skin.

I grabbed her wrist and pulled her closer—but she managed to slip from my grasp.

「I never said I'd follow your orders during winter break, did I? Besides, you're just wondering if I'm still wearing the pendant, aren't you?」

「For all I know, you might not be wearing it.」

「Come on. At least have some faith in me.」

If I could believe her that easily, I would have.

Then, I wouldn't feel the need to check every time.

It wasn't like I wanted to tie her down with something like a collar or anything either.

But Sendai-san always gave me reasons not to trust her. She was constantly going out of her way to keep things hidden from me —including things I couldn't even see.

That was why I could never stop doubting her.

「… You're hiding it on purpose today, aren't you?」

I stared at her neck, still concealed beneath her sweater.

「No, I'm not. But do you really want to see it that badly?」

「If I said I did, would you show it to me?」

In response, Sendai-san smiled.

「I'll show you—but only if you keep your promise too, Miyagi.」

「What promise?」

「That you'll let me kiss you.」

As she spoke, her hand reached out, and before I could react, she started unbuttoning my blouse.

「Wha—」

Caught off guard, I let out a startled sound before grabbing her hand.

「What is it?」

「I never said you could unbutton my blouse.」

I glared at her, protesting her sudden move. But my words didn't stop her hands. Instead, she undid another button and traced her fingers over my collarbone.

「If you want to check that I'm wearing the pendant that

badly, then stay still.」

「… What are you planning to do?」

「Didn't I tell you? I'm just going to kiss you.」

Sendai-san reminded me of the deal I had agreed to—one I had no way of refusing now. We'd just finished studying, so there was nothing left to use as an excuse.

Her fingertips, which had been brushing against my collarbone, moved toward the nape of my neck.

This much wasn't part of our agreement.

But before I could say anything, she pressed her lips to a spot just above my collarbone.

Can this even count as part of our trade?

As I mulled over something that felt like it should've been important but really wasn't, I felt her lips press softly against my neck. Then, again, in a different spot.

Her lips met my skin, lingering for a moment before pulling away—only to return once more. Slowly, they traced a path upward.

Her breath brushed against my neck, sending a ticklish sensation through me, making my body tense. Each kiss left behind a warmth that made it feel strangely difficult to breathe.

I wasn't sure if I should be letting this happen, but I couldn't bring myself to push Sendai-san away either.

It was probably within the bounds of our trade, so there was no reason to stop her.

Then, her lips pressed down firmly near my ear. Reflexively, I grabbed her arm, but she didn't hesitate—she sucked hard, sinking into my skin. It wasn't exactly painful, but it felt like the sharp prick of a needle.

My fingers dug into her arm instead of pushing her away. In response, she bit down on my neck, though she quickly pulled away.

The next thing I felt was something warmer than lips—wet and soft—against my earlobe.

Her tongue traced along the edge of my ear, and in tandem with that sensation, something deep in my chest tingled. Her breath, so close to my ear, made it feel like our heartbeats had somehow synced together.

Our breathing had fallen into the same rhythm.

That realization sent a jolt through me, and I shoved Sendai-san away with all my strength.

「This isn't just a kiss anymore.」

「You never told me to stop.」

「Just because I didn't say anything doesn't mean it's okay. And why did you even unbutton my blouse? There was no reason for that. You definitely left a mark too.」

I pressed my fingers to the spot where she had sucked, but of course, I couldn't tell if there was actually anything there.

「It's not like we ever agreed on where I'd kiss you. So you can't really complain about it, can you?」

Sendai-san stated matter-of-factly as she pressed her hand against the spot where she had most likely left a mark.

Her fingertips traced the curve of my ear before gliding through my hair.

Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, she leaned in again.

I pushed her away by the shoulders.

「There's a mirror on my desk. Go grab it for me.」

I might have let her get away with shifting the blame onto me for not specifying where she could or couldn't kiss me, but I wasn't about to let her brush off leaving a mark behind. That was

something Sendai-san should've known as well, so I felt like it was only fair that I was allowed to give her an order.

「I didn't leave any marks.」

「I'll be the judge of that.」

I shot back firmly, and after a brief moment of hesitation, Sendai-san finally went to retrieve my mirror.

This wasn't the first time she had kissed my neck.

But before, she had never been trying to leave a mark.

There had been times when her bites left my skin red, but those marks always faded within a day.

「Here.」

She handed me the mirror, and I adjusted it to see my reflection.

A solid red mark stood out against my neck. It was placed perfectly in a spot that wouldn't be covered even if I buttoned my blouse all the way up—though it wasn't glaringly obvious either.

「It's subtle. You can just hide it with your hair, can't you?」

Sendai-san said, trying to dodge responsibility.

She wasn't wrong.

I could cover most of it, but not completely.

She had done this on purpose.

She had left it just visible enough on purpose.

「It might not stand out much, but you definitely put it somewhere noticeable.」

「I don't think so. You can still hide it pretty well.」

Sendai-san made an unreasonable excuse and, as if to prove

her point, brushed my hair into place to hide the mark she'd left.

The ends of my hair tickled against my neck, making me swat her hands away before shoving the mirror towards her.

「There's no way I can hide it completely. What if someone sees it?」

「We're still on winter break, so you'll be fine.」

「And what if my family sees it?」

「Didn't you say they'd be at work all day? It'll be gone by tomorrow, so there's nothing to worry about.」

So that's what that was all about.

I was starting to understand why she had asked me that question before we started studying earlier.

「Okay, even if my family isn't around to see it, what about my friends?」

「Remind me, who was the one that said everyone's too busy studying for entrance exams to hang out this time of year?」

「… You're using my own words against me? You really do have a terrible personality.」

「Not as bad as yours, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san smiled as she threw out another awful remark.

Then, she took my arm.

「Can I kiss you one more time?」

She said it so easily—without hesitation, without shame.

I had let her do whatever she wanted for long enough.

「No. More importantly, let me see the necklace now.」

This time, it was her turn to hold up her end of the deal.

I reached out toward her, but before my fingers could even graze her neck, she pulled the pendant out from under her sweater herself.

Volume 4 Interlude

Miyagi Was So Sweet, It Hurt

(Sendai PoV)

Part 106-extra

It didn't matter whether winter break was close or still far off — after leaving Miyagi's place, there was only ever one place I'd end up.

Home.

A place where "I'm home" never got a "welcome back."

I took my time on the walk back, then slipped off my shoes, stepped into the living room to announce my return, and headed upstairs.

In my bedroom, I turned on the light, hung up my coat, and tucked the five-thousand-yen bill I'd gotten from Miyagi today into my piggy bank.

Today, I'd learned two things I hadn't known before.

The first was that there's a snack called "fudge," and that it was ridiculously sweet.

I didn't even know it existed until I had some in Miyagi's room today — or how sweet it could be. Frankly, I was surprised she'd brought out any snacks at all. She even brewed black tea to go with it. It was so out of the ordinary for her that I couldn't help but feel suspicious, expecting something bad to happen.

And then she went as far as to feed me the fudge herself. At that point, I honestly wouldn't have been surprised if something did happen.

But instead, what happened was something good.

I reached for the piggy bank and thought about lifting it up, but stopped.

I'd long since stopped adding five-hundred-yen coins to it – a bank that could hold up to a million yen if filled entirely with them.

Now, the only things inside were the few coins I'd put in before I met Miyagi, and every five-thousand-yen bill I'd ever gotten from her.

No matter how many of them piled up, they never made the piggy bank feel any heavier in my hands, so there wasn't much point in checking.

And from now on, there would only be a limited number of bills I'd get from her to add to it.

Knowing that, I doubted the weight would ever change.

Still, I wished I could see Miyagi enough times for it to get heavier.

It wasn't about wanting more money. I just wanted to see her that often – enough to make the piggy bank feel heavier.

And I wanted to keep seeing her, even after we graduated from high school.

That was how I truly felt.

「It's almost winter break, huh.」

It was something that would normally take away my chances to see Miyagi, but today I learned something else – that she wanted to study with me over winter break badly enough to offer me a trade. Because of that, we'd be able to see each other during the break. And since she wasn't going to give me any five-thousand-yen bills during that time, it wouldn't change the weight of my piggy bank at all.

I thought back to what she'd said earlier today.

『… Come tutor me over winter break.』

She'd said the exact words I wanted to hear in a modest voice. I would've been happy even if she'd asked in her usual flat tone, but she'd even gone as far as to tempt me with a kiss in exchange.

Honestly, if Miyagi hadn't brought up winter break first, I would've had no choice but to bring it up myself – so I was glad she did it. It was a little annoying that she still wouldn't tell me what school she was aiming for, yet was willing to use kissing as a bargaining chip just to get me to study with her.

Still, I was genuinely happy with what she'd done today.

I placed a small standing mirror on the table and sat beside it.

In the reflection, I could see the pendant Miyagi gave me resting against my neck – and just below it, something else she'd left me with today.

「I wonder if it's noticeable.」

I hadn't had a chance to look at it in a mirror at her place, so I didn't notice until now, but there was a faint mark left on my neck – one that would probably be gone by tomorrow.

It was Miyagi who'd left it there, though technically, I was the one who caused her to do it.

I'm just reaping what I sow, I thought to myself. I'd taken advantage of the fact that Miyagi hadn't stopped me and ended up going too far. After that kiss—sweeter than the fudge itself—I'd unbuttoned her blouse and even unhooked her bra, so it only made sense that she bit me in return.

Still, I wished she'd thought it through a little more before doing it.

It was cruel of her to bite me somewhere that couldn't be hidden, even if I buttoned my blouse all the way up. If I were just walking around at night like I did today, it wouldn't have been a problem, but what was I supposed to do at school?

Part of me wanted the mark to stay, like a reminder that today's rare version of Miyagi had really existed. But if it didn't disappear by tomorrow, I couldn't even begin to imagine what people at school would say.

「What was it again? Lemons were supposed to get rid of hickeys quickly?」

I didn't know how to get rid of an actual bite mark, but I had heard how to make a hickey fade. I wasn't even sure if it was true, but Umina had once said the quickest way to get rid of one was to press a lemon slice against it.

I remembered it clearly—from that time I saw a bruise on Miyagi's leg.

Back then, she'd said she wanted to test whether lemons really worked, and ended up leaving a hickey on my arm for the experiment. But in the end, she didn't even have any lemons to use, so I never found out if it actually worked.

And from that moment on, Miyagi and I had only gone on to do stranger, more unexpected things together.

「What am I going to do about this?」

I hadn't checked the fridge yet, but just like how it was at Miyagi's place, I doubted there were any lemons in it. I'd also heard that either heat or cold could make hickeys fade faster. Maybe that was worth trying.

I pressed my palm over the mark Miyagi had left on me.

Then I pushed down a little harder.

I wanted the warmth from my hand to soak into the bite mark—but even then, it didn't feel nearly as warm. It was so much hotter when I was touching Miyagi.

I wish I could've touched her more.

I should've touched her everywhere I could see.

I should've felt the shape of her chest before she had the chance to hug me.

If I had done that, though, the mark under my palm right now might've ended up being something worse—more than just a bite, maybe a real wound, something that bled.

And I would've been okay with that.

If it had turned into something that bad, I'd skip school and ask Miyagi to come visit me. Then, while she was there, I'd use that

chance to kiss her

「… I should study.」

I pulled my hand away from the bite.

If I kept thinking about her like this, I was definitely going to end up dreaming about Miyagi.

Just like when I had that dream of Miyagi touching me on the last day of summer break, I'd probably end up dreaming about what happened today and wake up in a bad mood. I hated the idea of going to my classes with that kind of dream still clinging to the back of my mind.

I put away the small standing mirror and changed into my loungewear.

I spread out my reference books and notebooks on the table.

Miyagi hadn't asked if I wanted to eat dinner with her today, so I hadn't eaten anything at all, but I didn't really feel like making anything either. I hadn't even tried applying anything warm or cold to the bite mark she gave me. I just couldn't bring myself to care about it right now.

If it was still there tomorrow, I'd use that as an excuse to complain to her. I could call her into the music prep room and tell her off there. And if she didn't show up, I'd just head to her place and complain to her face.

Either way, it gave me a reason to see Miyagi.

「… This is so stupid.」

I doodled a crocodile with tissues sprouting from its back in my notebook, then crossed it out right away.

Daydreaming about her leaving me with a wound instead of a mark, imagining reasons to go complain to her—it was all just so stupid.

Too many unusual things had happened today, and it was making me feel uneasy.

「I wonder how that plush is doing?」

The black cat plush I gave Miyagi for Christmas was probably having an equally uneasy night too.

I set down my pencil and dove into bed.

Closing my eyes, I ran my fingertips over the spot where Miyagi had bitten me.

I ended up waking before my alarm even went off.

Thanks to Miyagi, I couldn't focus on studying at all last night, and even worse, I barely slept.

The dreams I had were her fault too—because in them, I was doing all the things I couldn't bring myself to do in real life yesterday.

I'm actually the worst, I thought to myself.

I let out a long sigh, like I was trying to empty myself of air, and pulled the futon over my head.

I didn't want to get up.

I pressed my hand against the place Miyagi had left her mark.

I wasn't sure if it was still there.

I felt stuck.

If I checked and the mark was still obvious, I'd want to skip school. But I didn't want to stay home either. And I couldn't just skip school and wander around aimlessly.

If the mark was gone, that made me feel uneasy too—like everything good that happened yesterday had been a dream.

Whether it was still there or not, I couldn't make peace with it.

I rolled around in bed, but time wasn't going to wait for me.

Eventually, my alarm started going off, and I had no choice but to get up.

I took a deep breath, let it out, then placed the small mirror on the table and checked the spot where Miyagi had bitten me yesterday.

「Hmm…」

It had faded quite a bit.

I already knew where it was, so I could still see it if I looked closely, but to anyone else, it probably wouldn't be noticeable.

Even if someone saw it, they wouldn't think it was a bite mark.

I could probably pass it off as a bug bite, or just say I didn't know how I got it, and people would believe me.

That left me feeling both relieved and disappointed.

It was like the outcome had landed somewhere in the middle.

Realistically, I should've been glad it wasn't visible, but I couldn't bring myself to feel happy about it.

I ran my fingers over the faded mark one more time, then headed downstairs.

I brushed my teeth, ate breakfast and changed into my uniform.

Standing in front of the mirror, I buttoned my blouse all the way up.

It didn't completely cover the mark, but no one would notice it unless they looked really close.

Just before leaving the house, I undid one button.

I felt like if I did anything out of the ordinary, it'd draw attention to things that normally wouldn't be noticed, so it was best to just act like usual.

I walked to school at my usual pace, down the freezing winter

streets, then through the noisy hallways like always.

I didn't see Miyagi anywhere.

I walked up the stairs, headed toward my classroom, but never ran into her along the way.

It wasn't like my classroom was far—it wasn't a ten- or twenty-minute walk or anything—so I got there in no time.

Before going in, I touched the faded bite mark one more time.

Today, it bothered me more than the pendant I was wearing.

The mark was just a mark—it didn't hurt. But at the same time, it did hurt, and the dull ache made me overly aware of it.

Everything Miyagi ever gave me was difficult to deal with.

The five-thousand-yen bills I couldn't use. The pendant that felt more like a collar. And then there were other things lying around my house, too.

And now, this "mark" she left behind wouldn't leave me alone. It was like it was following me around, forcing me to think of nothing but Miyagi.

I pressed on it with my fingertips before entering the classroom.

I set my bag down on my seat, walked over to Umina and Mariko, and greeted them with a "good morning."

「Morning, Hazuki.」

Mariko responded in her usual cheerful tone, and Umina followed with a quiet "good morning."

「You don't seem very happy, Umina.」

To be more specific, she looked like she was in a bad mood.

Things are going to be difficult today right off the bat, huh, I thought to myself.

「My parents found out I was planning to work a part-time job over winter break, and now they're mad at me.」

Umina said, sulking.

Mariko let out an exasperated response.

「Of course they're mad. It's right before our entrance exams! You get it too, right, Hazuki?」

「Well, yeah. You can work as much as you want after the exams, so why not just wait until then?」

「I guess you guys have a point…」

Umina replied, not sounding very convinced.

Both of them were looking right at me, but neither noticed the mark on my neck.

I doubted Umina ever would, and Mariko wouldn't either.

Miyagi might, but I didn't know if she had, since we hadn't even crossed paths today.

If she called me over, we'd definitely see each other then, but

she wasn't the type to call me over two days in a row.

And after what happened yesterday, I doubted she'd want to see me at all.

I lifted my hand to touch the mark, but ended up adjusting my necktie instead.

Winter break was almost here.

I wanted Miyagi to ask me to come over as soon as possible.

I grabbed my arm, stopping it from drifting back toward the bite mark.

Chapter 34

A Reason to See Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 107

By the time my prep school lessons ended, the streets were already cloaked in darkness.

I considered heading straight home, but my feet had other plans, turning in a different direction on their own. It felt as if my will had shifted from my head to my steps, carrying me forward without a clear destination in mind.

I weaved through the streets, turning a few corners and nearly brushing past people bundled up against the cold. I wanted to pretend I didn't know where my feet were taking me, but as I drew closer to a familiar sign, it became obvious exactly where I was headed.

A few dozen meters later, I arrived at the bookstore—the same place where Miyagi had once covered my purchase with a five-thousand-yen bill when I'd forgotten my wallet.

I hesitated in front of the automatic doors.

Should I go in? Or should I just head home?

It wasn't like I was in such a rush that I needed to head home right away and start studying the moment I got back.

「Come to think of it, I still haven't bought them yet, huh.」

I suddenly remembered that I hadn't picked up the latest issues of the magazines Umina liked to read—and with school starting again tomorrow, it was probably best to have them. I didn't need them, but if I wanted to keep up with her conversations, it wouldn't hurt to give them a read.

Deciding that was reason enough, I stepped inside the bookstore.

The store was spacious, and since I wasn't in a hurry, I took my time wandering through the aisles instead of heading straight for the magazine section.

「Right, there's no way she'd be here.」

It had been about a year and a half since I first met Miyagi here, back when we were still in our second year. Even now, I continued to follow her orders for the price of five-thousand yen. Lately, we'd been breaking more of our rules, but it didn't feel like our relationship had changed much.

That being said, it wasn't as if our relationship had remained completely unchanged.

A lot had happened since we first met, and some things had shifted. But at its core, it didn't feel like much had changed.

The same went for this winter break.

Instead of receiving five-thousand-yen, I was now being paid with kisses. But despite this, our relationship didn't feel all that different.

I stopped in front of the magazine shelf and picked up one of the many issues with flashy lettering on the cover.

Flipping through the pages, I skimmed through it before returning it to the shelf.

Repeating this a few more times with other magazines, I eventually made my way to the register with the ones Umina bought every month.

This time, my wallet was in my bag.

No five-thousand-yen bill appeared from behind me, and I paid for my purchase myself before receiving a bag with the magazines inside.

Checking my phone for the time, I saw that not much had

passed.

My feet wandered off on their own, leading me toward the manga section.

As I strolled past the shelves, my gaze landed on a familiar figure.

She stood with her back to me, dressed in a coat and scarf I'd never seen before.

Even so, I knew right away—it was Miyagi.

Even though she hadn't been there the first two times I wandered past, Miyagi was now standing in front of the new releases, too absorbed in scanning the covers to notice me.

Just like before I even stepped into the store, I hesitated.

I hadn't come here on the off chance I'd run into Miyagi. But if I called out to her now, it would seem like that was exactly why I was here.

It was just a coincidence.

This was all just by chance.

It wasn't intentional.

I only came to buy a magazine. You just happened to be here.

As I cycled through excuse after excuse in my head, I tightened my grip around the bag holding the magazine.

I hadn't come to see Miyagi.

But I had considered the possibility that she might be here.

I wasn't satisfied with our relationship.

I hated that I had to go through all these mental gymnastics just to justify calling out to her. And though I didn't know if the things that unsettled us were the same, I had a feeling Miyagi was just as dissatisfied.

If she wasn't, she wouldn't have slept beside me or asked to check whether I was wearing the pendant or not. If nothing had changed, she wouldn't have asked me to help her study over winter break or invited me to stay the night.

I took a quiet breath.

「Miyagi.」

I called out to her, keeping my voice low—just enough for someone lost in thought while picking out a book to hear.

Miyagi didn't turn around.

I had a feeling she had heard me and was simply ignoring me. But at the same time, maybe my voice had been too quiet, and she really hadn't noticed.

For a moment, the thought of just leaving crossed my mind.

But then I felt it—disappointment.

Disappointment in myself for even considering walking away, and in Miyagi for not so much as glancing in my direction.

I knew exactly what needed to be done to get rid of this dissatisfaction.

All we had to do was bend the rules a little.

We could decide that talking to each other at school was allowed.

Or that meeting up on weekends was fine.

Or we could just become friends.

There were so many ways to change our relationship, so many possibilities within reach.

But I didn't have the courage to rewrite the rules.

I only had enough to call out to her once more.

「Miyagi.」

I spoke a little louder this time, and Miyagi finally turned to face me.

「Sendai-san.」

「Are you here to buy manga?」

I stepped closer, glancing at the book in her hands.

「Yeah. What about you, Sendai-san?」

「Just picking up the same magazines as always.」

I lifted the shopping bag in my left hand as proof. Miyagi gave a short, indifferent response.

「Oh, I see.」

With that, the conversation came to an abrupt end. She took a few steps away, browsing through more manga, but my attention drifted toward the scarf wrapped around her neck rather than the books in her hands.

「I'm going to the register now.」

Miyagi announced as if signaling she was heading out first, then started walking. I followed behind her in silence.

「… Sendai-san, I'm going straight home after this, you know.」

She stopped in her tracks.

「I know.」

「Then why are you following me?」

「Because you didn't say goodbye.」

She wanted to leave me behind and go home, but she hadn't given me a proper farewell yet.

「Goodbye, then.」

Miyagi said before walking off again, but I trailed after her once more. This time, she didn't protest.

Instead, she paid for her books, took her bag, and walked straight out of the store without glancing back. I followed her outside, and as I did, she spoke in a cold tone.

「Stop following me.」

「Why?」

I asked, watching her back.

「I don't want people seeing us together.」

「The chances of running into someone we know aren't that high.」

「There's always a possibility. You always say things so irresponsibly, Sendai-san.」

「Come on, isn't it fine to just walk together for a little while?」

「Just a little while?」

Miyagi asked, turning around at last.

「Yeah, just for a bit.」

「… Fine. I suppose a little while wouldn't hurt.」

She didn't sound particularly happy about it, but she didn't seem to hate it either.

「Alright, then. Let's walk there together.」

I took three steps to stand beside her.

「Where exactly is 'there'?」

「Just somewhere along the way.」

I hadn't even thought about where we'd part ways, so I didn't have an answer to her question.

Miyagi didn't push for one either.

As we walked side by side, my eyes drifted to her scarf—the same one that had caught my attention back at the bookstore. I gave it a small tug.

「It's unusual seeing you wear a scarf.」

「There's nothing unusual about it. It was just cold today.」

It was definitely colder than usual, cold enough that our breaths hung in the air. But Miyagi was never the type to wear a scarf, even on days when it felt like it might snow. As far as I could remember, she usually just wore a warm-looking coat, never anything around her neck. Even when she shivered from the cold, she never put one on.

So her excuse—"it was just cold today"—didn't feel like the real reason.

I tugged at her scarf again.

「Let me get a closer look.」

「No.」

「Come on, it's fine, isn't it?」

「You're choking me by pulling on it.」

She sounded annoyed as she pushed against my shoulders, but I didn't let go. Miyagi sighed, her breath almost thick enough to turn the entire city white.

「Fine, I'll take it off. Just let go.」

I obediently let go, and she unwrapped the scarf from her neck, handing it over to me.

I stared at the turtleneck sweater that had been hidden underneath.

「… So, why were you wearing a scarf again?」

「I told you, it's because it's cold today.」

「Here I thought you were trying to hide something.」

She was being unfair.

I already knew why Miyagi had worn a scarf today.

It was to cover the marks I'd left on her a few days ago. And if she took it off, I thought I'd be able to see if they were still there.

「Well, they disappeared already.」

She didn't say what had disappeared, just like I hadn't said what she was trying to hide.

「Really?」

「Yes, really.」

「Let me see, then.」

「No.」

Her voice was colder than the winter wind, and before I knew it, the scarf in my hands was snatched away. Miyagi shoved her bag of manga books at me, quickly wrapped the scarf back around her neck, then took the bag back and started walking again.

I followed behind her, tracing the same path we'd walked as second-year students.

Back then, Miyagi had been silent. And now, she was just as quiet. But unlike before, the silence no longer bothered me. Instead, I felt glad about my decision not to go straight home today.

「Sendai-san, how far do you plan on following me? Your house isn't even this way.」

A voice laced with irritation made me realize Miyagi didn't share my sentiment.

「I told you—just somewhere along the way.」

「Well, this should be far enough. Bye. See you later.」

She exhaled along with her words, white breath fading into the cold air.

「Wait.」

Before she could slip away, I grabbed her arm.

「I don't want to. Let go of me.」

「If you want me to let go, then show me your neck.」

「I already said no.」

「Come on, just let me see it.」

If the hickeys had disappeared, then I'd just have to leave new ones.

Next time, I'd make sure they lasted longer.

Long enough to be seen at school.

「Absolutely not.」

Miyagi smacked my hand away.

「You're so stingy. It's not like I'm asking you to take off your clothes or anything. What's the harm?」

I reluctantly let go of her arm but still couldn't accept her answer, so I complained anyway.

「If you were asking me to take off my clothes right here, you'd be worse than a pervert—you'd be getting yourself arrested. Actually, I should just report you now and have you locked up.」

「You're so cruel, Miyagi.」

Whether the hickeys remained or not, our relationship stayed the same. I knew leaving a mark wouldn't change anything between us—but I still wished it would. Otherwise, even if Miyagi ended up going to the same university as Utsunomiya, she might still not want to see me.

「Sendai-san, I'm actually going home now, so don't follow me.」

「Okay. I'll see you later, then.」

There were so many things I should have said. But those were the only words I managed to get out.

「Bye.」

Miyagi waved, never saying that we'd see each other again.

I waved back anyway, and she walked off toward her home.

A Reason to See Miyagi (II)

Part 108

「Here.」

As soon as I stepped inside, a five-thousand-yen bill was handed to me.

「Thanks.」

I took hold of the edge of the bill and tried to pull it toward me, but it didn't budge. After giving it another tug, I finally managed to take it.

It hadn't come as easily as usual, which made me glance at Miyagi.

「Miyagi?」

「It's nothing.」

Her voice said otherwise.

She was in a bad mood right off the bat.

But I wasn't in the best mood either.

I hadn't expected her to call me over right after winter break ended, but I also didn't expect her to wait almost a week into the new semester before doing so.

「Didn't you wait a little too long to call me over?」

「You told me I could ask you to come whenever, didn't you?」

「Yeah, but I didn't think it'd be like this.」

If she hadn't called me today, we might've gone all the way until our entrance exams without seeing each other again.

The exam day was fast approaching.

This was the time we should be focusing on our own studies.

I appreciated the extra time to study and didn't mind not seeing her for a while, but still—I wasn't amused.

On top of that, she hadn't contacted me once this whole time.

I really didn't find any of this amusing.

「You should be grateful. I was being considerate by giving you time to study before the exam.」

Miyagi said, acting like she'd done me a favor as we made our way to her room.

「I didn't ask you to be considerate.」

I shut the door behind me, took off my blazer, and undid a button on my blouse before taking my usual seat. Miyagi sat down beside me. My gaze went straight to her neck, where I noticed her blouse was buttoned all the way up to the top. There were no visible marks left on her, though.

Well, that was to be expected.

It had been a while since then.

If there had been a hickey on her, that would've meant it was from someone other than me, so if anything, I should be glad that there was nothing there anymore. Yet, at the same time, I couldn't help but feel disappointed anyway.

I reached out toward Miyagi's neck.

But before I could touch her, she stood up.

「I'm going to get something to drink.」

「I'm fine without one.」

「Even if you don't want anything, I do.」

Her voice was flat as she left the room. Left alone, I spread my reference books and workbooks across the table before pressing my forehead against it.

After entrance exams, graduation would be right around the corner.

We didn't have much time left.

「Sendai-san, what are you doing?」

Before I knew it, Miyagi had returned.

「Studying in my sleep.」

「Even though you're still awake?」

「Nope, I'm definitely asleep.」

I answered, my face still planted against the table, but she rudely tried to push me aside and said, "You're in the way."

When I looked up, I saw that beside the textbooks on the table were glasses of barley tea and soda. I grabbed the cup of barley tea, took a sip, and asked,

「Do you think you'll get into your university?」

「What about you, Sendai-san?」

「Yeah, I think I might be fine.」

I never ended up going to the high school my parents wanted me to go to.

I wasn't going to get into the university they wanted me to attend either.

The university I'd apathetically picked out wasn't what my parents wanted from me, but it did still require a certain level of academic ability. The staff at the prep school told me I had a good chance of getting in, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little worried.

There was no such thing as certainties in this world.

But there was no point in making a fuss now, and I'd done everything I could. If things didn't work out, I still had backups to fall back on. That was all I could do.

「So, what about you, Miyagi?」

「I'm sure I'll get into at least one of them.」

「Isn't that a little too nonchalant after you've come all this way already?」

「It's not like I have that much faith in myself.」

Miyagi said with uncertainty in her voice.

This wasn't going to do.

Miyagi needed to get into the university of her choice.

If she failed her entrance exam, that meant she would stay here.

And even if Miyagi were to stay here, it wouldn't change the fact that I would be leaving. And even if I were to fail my own entrance exams, I would attend another prep school somewhere else, so that would mean our futures would no longer have anything to do with each other anymore.

「You've been putting a lot of effort into studying, so have a little more faith in yourself.」

If she was the one saying she wasn't confident in herself, she might end up failing even though she had a good chance of passing.

I wasn't entirely sure which university Miyagi would end up choosing, but I didn't want the possibility of her going to the same university as Utsunomiya to vanish. I wanted her to take her entrance exams believing she could pass them all.

「I just don't like studying.」

「If you keep saying things like that, you might actually fail. Try to be a little more positive.」

「That's impossible. But also, if you're so afraid of failing, then we should start studying already.」

「Hmm, how about you give me an order first? I'm not feeling very motivated right now.」

It felt like it'd been a long time since the last time I used the word "order."

「No, let's study first. It's almost time for the exams.」

Miyagi said, more serious than usual, as she picked up her pencil and looked down at her workbook. I, on the other hand, didn't feel like doing the same.

Too many thoughts were swirling in my head. I needed something to clear my mind.

「Why not just give me an order first? I'll have to do it anyway, so I'd rather get it over with so I can study in peace.」

「Then tell me how to pass my entrance exams with absolute certainty.」

「I wish I knew the answer to that too. Give me a more realistic order.」

「If you're so insistent on it, then why don't you come up with an order instead, Sendai-san?」

Miyagi looked up from her workbook, sounding annoyed.

「You want me to come up with something?」

「Yeah, think of something I can order you to do.」

「Isn't it a little weird to have me decide my own order?」

I was used to following orders, not coming up with them. Besides, thinking up orders for myself to follow required a special mindset, and I wasn't sure I had it.

「If you think it's weird, then just study. Otherwise, I'll come up with something later.」

「… Fine. I'll think of something right now.」

Miyagi's idea was way too broad, but it was still better than her giving me an order that went too far.

I stared at my cup, watching the droplets slide down its surface, as I thought it over.

I needed to come up with something safe—something Miyagi would actually agree to.

As I racked my brain for an idea like that, my gaze drifted away from the cup of barley tea.

I looked over at our workbooks.

Then an eraser, then a pencil case, then the hand gripping a pencil.

My eyes stopped there.

「I just thought of something.」

「What is it?」

「Order me to cast a charm on you.」

I said with a smile, but Miyagi only frowned in response.

She was probably trying to figure out what kind of "charm" I meant.

But no matter how much she thought about it, she wouldn't be able to find the answer—just like a question that had none.

「… Fine, cast a charm then.」

After thinking for a solid ten seconds, Miyagi finally gave the order, like she'd given up on trying to figure it out.

「Okay, then let me borrow this for a bit.」

I said as I took the pencil from her hand.

But I didn't actually need the pencil, so I simply set it down on the table. Instead, I took Miyagi's wrist in my hand. She was clearly wary, but I ignored that as I brought her fingertips to my lips. When I brushed them lightly against the tips of her nails, her hand tensed.

「It's a charm to help you get the right answers. You did say you wanted a surefire way to pass, didn't you?」

I gave her a simple explanation, hoping it would keep her from pulling away.

「I've never heard of a charm like that before.」

「Maybe you just didn't know about it?」

Tightening my grip on her wrist, I pulled her hand toward me and pressed my lips against it.

The back of her hand, the base of her fingers, the middle of her middle finger—I kissed each spot over and over, feeling the warmth of her skin against my lips as the strength slowly drained from her hand. Unlike just touching her, kissing her let me feel her temperature more directly.

I pressed my lips firmly against the back of her hand, enough to feel the shape of her bones beneath the skin. When I tried to suck lightly, she attempted to pull away, so I kissed the tip of her finger before finally releasing her wrist.

「… You just made that charm up on the spot, didn't you, Sendai-san?」

Miyagi asked as she stared at her hand, sounding unimpressed.

「Even if I did, it doesn't matter as long as it works, right?」

In truth, what I really wanted to do was kiss her neck and leave a mark somewhere visible. But if I did that, she'd probably throw me out of her room on the spot. Maybe even refuse to speak

to me ever again.

「I don't think it's going to work.」

Hearing the cold tone in Miyagi's voice, I grabbed her hand again.

「It will.」

After saying those empty words, I kissed the tip of her finger.

Taking her index finger between my lips, I pressed my teeth lightly against the second joint and ran my tongue slowly over the pad of her fingertip.

Miyagi angrily pulled her hand away.

「Stop that.」

「Why? You like this kind of thing, don't you, Miyagi?」

Her voice was sharp, but she didn't resist when I took her hand again.

She'd ordered me to lick her fingers countless times before. There was no way I was letting her brush it off so easily now.

I stared at Miyagi.

She avoided my gaze, but she didn't look particularly upset either. When I pressed my lips to her palm, her arm twitched slightly, and I slid my tongue between her fingers.

「Sendai-san!」

Miyagi, who rarely raised her voice, exclaimed loudly as she smacked my arm. Then, she dug her fingernails into my uniform.

The dull pain made me let go of her hand, and she immediately pulled out a tissue from the crocodile-covered box, wiping her fingers.

I had seen her do this many times before, and it had never bothered me.

But for some reason, seeing her do it today made it feel like she was trying to wipe my entire existence away.

It irritated me.

No, more than that—it infuriated me.

I reached out, brushing my fingers against her neck. Miyagi flinched back slightly, and even that small reaction was enough to set me off.

I grabbed her and pulled her close, pressing my lips to her cheek.

She's definitely going to resist.

Or at least, that's what I thought.

Instead, Miyagi wrapped her arms around my back, pulling me in even closer than necessary.

「… Miyagi?」

But instead of replying, she blew air into my ear before pressing something hard against it. I immediately recognized it as her teeth and could already tell what was coming next. Before I could pull away, Miyagi bit down.

「Ow!」

I exclaimed, but she didn't let go. Instead, her teeth sank in deeper, sharp pain shooting through my ear as if she was about to tear it clean off. I grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her away.

「What's wrong with you, Sendai-san?」

Miyagi asked in a displeased tone.

「That's my line. Quit biting me whenever you don't like something. It seriously hurts.」

「You're the one who keeps trying weird things.」

I wasn't sure whether she was referring to me licking her hand or pulling her into an embrace, but it was clear she wasn't happy with either.

「Maybe so, but you didn't have to bite that hard.」

「You weren't casting a real charm either.」

「I was. And besides, you were the one who told me to come up with an order in the first place.」

Tracing it back to the start, it was technically Miyagi's fault for not thinking of one herself. Maybe she thought the same thing, because she stayed silent, sulking instead of arguing back.

「Anything else you want to say?」

I asked as she picked up the pencil lying on the table.

「If I don't pass, I'm holding a grudge against you. I don't want to spend another year studying.」

「Should I cast another charm on you, then?」

「No.」

She refused without even looking at me, her attention fixed on her notebook. But there wasn't a single word written on the blank page.

「Miyagi.」

「What?」

「Make sure you actually study.」

「I was going to, even without you telling me.」

She replied, still not looking up.

I couldn't bring myself to say something as heavy as telling her she had to pass in exchange for that half-baked charm I cast on her. But even so, I wished for her to succeed.

A Reason to See Miyagi (III)

Part 109

As after school hours approached, the classroom felt restless.

Homeroom felt more like a formality than anything, and even the teacher didn't seem very into it. I looked away from the teacher, who was fumbling for words to end the day with, and glanced over at Umina.

The standardized entrance exam had gone by without a hitch.

I didn't know how serious she was being when she said it, but earlier, Umina had called it easy, and Mariko had just laughed and said, "got through it somehow."

I wasn't sure how well I did either, but I felt like it had gone okay.

I hadn't seen Miyagi at all since the day I cast that charm on her, and she hadn't contacted me either, so I had no idea how the exam went for her.

Normally, at a time like this, you'd expect someone to message you and let you know if things went well or not.

But we didn't have that kind of relationship.

I knew that—really, I did.

Even so, I couldn't help but feel like Miyagi was being way too cold.

I turned my gaze back to the blackboard.

The teacher scanned the room and explained one last unimportant thing like it actually mattered, then homeroom ended. The classroom quickly filled with noise, and it was finally after school.

「Hazuki, there's somewhere I wanna go today. Can you come with me?」

I heard Umina say, but I found myself hesitating.

I stood up, but I couldn't bring myself to say "Sure."

「Oh, are you busy today?」

Umina asked, placing her bag down on my desk. Her expression didn't look too happy.

I should just say I'll go with her.

I forced a smile.

Just as I was about to tell her I would, Mariko's voice cut in from beside me.

「Isn't it fine if it's just the two of us today?」

「Huh?」

Mariko said as she took Umina by the hand, ignoring the way she looked a little unsatisfied.

「Sorry. I'll make it up to you both next time.」

I called out to the two of them as they left, and Mariko waved back at me.

I reluctantly pulled out my phone.

It wasn't like I had to see Miyagi or anything.

But the fact was, I had hesitated to answer when Umina asked to hang out.

『Hurry up and invite me over already.』

I typed the message.

But before I could send it, I froze.

I was only reaching out because she hadn't messaged me first.

I wasn't happy with how things had become, but if I didn't say something now, she might never contact me again. I didn't have much of a choice.

I sighed deeply.

Then, I hit "Send" and waited five minutes.

But just as I expected, Miyagi didn't reply.

For a second, I considered asking her to meet me in the music preparation room, but I gave up on that idea pretty quickly.

If she didn't answer my message, there was no way she'd show up just because I asked.

Her class was right next door.

It'd be faster to just go see her.

I grabbed my coat and bag and stepped into the hallway.

The classroom door was shut, so I peeked in through the small window.

And right then, I saw Miyagi and her friends leaving through the opposite door.

Our eyes met.

But before I could say anything, Miyagi quickly told her friends, "I forgot something," and ducked back into the classroom.

A few moments later, my phone buzzed with a notification.

『Wait a little bit before leaving and meet me at my house.』

She probably didn't want to say that out loud in front of her friends, so she texted instead.

That thought alone annoyed me.

It made me want to storm into her classroom and tell her friends everything—how we spent time together after school, how we met up during summer and winter break.

I wouldn't actually do that, though.

It'd just make my remaining time in high school harder than it needed to be.

『How long is a "little bit"?』

I replied, leaning against the wall between our classrooms.

As I aimlessly looked around, I saw Miyagi's friends—who'd been waiting for her—return to the classroom, probably because it was too cold out in the hallway.

Then, another message popped up.

『Wait until after I've left the classroom.』

『Okay.』

『We're about to head out. Don't call out to me.』

『Yeah, yeah.』

We weren't allowed to talk to each other at school.

After nearly breaking that rule, I sent my reply and stared down the hallway.

Miyagi came out with her friends not long after.

I didn't know exactly how long I was supposed to wait after she left, but standing around in the hallway made the time feel longer than it was.

I didn't feel like going into any classrooms either, so after waiting five minutes, I left the school grounds.

I walked the road to Miyagi's place, trying not to look like I was in a hurry.

The scenery passed by slowly and felt dull.

The roadside trees were bare, and the people walking by all looked equally uninteresting.

Everything felt so colorless—it was kind of depressing.

I wasn't walking particularly slowly, but I wasn't rushing either.

Eventually, I picked up the pace.

I was supposed to be five minutes behind her, yet as I neared Miyagi's apartment, I saw her up ahead.

「Miyagi.」

I called out to her when I was about a minute away from the building, but she didn't stop.

I caught up to her in front of the apartment and entered with her.

「Sendai-san, I did tell you to wait a little bit before coming over, didn't I?」

「I did wait before leaving. I must've just caught up to you.」

We walked through the building's entrance and got into the elevator.

「Isn't it kind of weird that you managed to catch up? I bet you were hurrying over.」

「Or maybe you're just a slow walker?」

「I'm not. You're the one who walks too fast, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi complained as we stepped off the elevator and walked to her door.

She unlocked it, and I followed her inside.

"Wait a second," she said, disappearing into her room.

She came back with a five-thousand-yen bill and handed it to me.

「Thanks.」

I tugged at the bill, which she didn't let go of right away, but it ended up in my hands soon enough.

I tucked it away and looked at Miyagi, who was wearing a strange expression on her face.

「Miyagi?」

「It's nothing.」

We exchanged the same words as we had last time I was here.

Then she quickly disappeared into the kitchen.

I headed into her room first, took off my coat and blazer, undid the first button of my blouse, and pulled out a manga volume from her bookshelf, where her black cat plushie sat.

I lay down on her bed and flipped through the pages.

Soon after, the door opened and Miyagi came in, placing a cup of barley tea and a bottle of soda on the table.

「How cold do I need to set the air conditioner for you not to feel hot?」

Miyagi asked as she picked up my coat and blazer from the floor and hung them up.

「Don't worry about it. Taking those off is just a habit at this point, so anything's fine. If it gets too hot, I'll let you know. Anyway —Miyagi, don't you have something to tell me?」

I closed the manga I was reading and sat up.

「Like what?」

Miyagi sat down in her usual spot, looking completely

clueless.

「How was your exam? Think you did well?」

「Is that really something I need to tell you, Sendai-san? I said I'd let you know if I passed, but I never promised to tell you how I felt about it. Besides, I've still got more exams to take.」

「You could at least say how you think it went. Don't be stingy—just tell me.」

I grabbed a pillow from her bed and smacked her lightly on the head.

She was right—we still had more exams to come, and she wasn't obligated to tell me how she did. We hadn't made any promises about it. I knew I was just being selfish. Still, I couldn't help wanting to know.

「Miyagi.」

I said, hitting her with the pillow again.

「… I guess I did okay.」

After a short pause, she finally gave a vague answer.

「"Okay"? What's that supposed to mean?」

「Even if you ask me that, I don't know how to explain it. What about you, Sendai-san? How'd yours go?」

「I think I did okay too.」

I answered with the same words she used, and Miyagi turned her back to me.

I couldn't see her face, but I could tell she was in a bad mood.

She took a sip of her soda, then set the half-empty glass back down.

I was used to the silence.

Even though I knew she'd get upset, I gave her that answer anyway.

Still, the heavy atmosphere hanging in the room was starting to get to me, so I spoke up again.

「Anyway, Miyagi—are you planning on going on a graduation trip or anything?」

I brought up a random, not especially interesting topic.

「No. What about you, Sendai-san?」

「Well, not a trip, exactly, but Umina and the others want to do something at least.」

「I see.」

She replied in a quiet voice.

Miyagi suddenly turned to look at me, then stood up and snatched the manga I'd left on her bed.

「Hey, I was reading that.」

I hadn't really planned on finishing it, but I complained anyway.

「You weren't even reading it. The book was closed.」

「I was just about to keep reading.」

「I'm about to give you an order, so read it later.」

Miyagi said as she returned the manga to her bookshelf.

「What am I doing today?」

「Sit over there.」

Miyagi instructed as she stood in front of her closet.

「On the bed?」

「Yep.」

I followed her orders and sat on the bed like I was sitting in a chair.

She opened the closet and pulled out a light blue towel.

「Here.」

She tossed it toward me—it landed on the floor in front of me.

But Miyagi didn't seem to care. Before I could reach down to grab it, she gave another order.

「You know what I'm going to ask you to do with that, don't you?」

She asked quietly, pointing at the towel.

A Reason to See Miyagi (IV)

Part 110

「You want me to do it myself?」

I asked as I picked up the light blue towel from the floor.

「Yep, that's right.」

Thinking back, I already knew what she wanted without her needing to say it.

But when I thought about what she was going to do to me afterward, I didn't really feel like going along with it.

Miyagi had some really bad tastes.

She always gave me orders that definitely weren't something you could do in front of others.

Then again, being ordered around by her like this was something we couldn't be open about either.

「Now hurry up and do it.」

I hesitated, still holding the towel, as Miyagi urged me on.

Whether I did it myself or had her do it, the result would be the same.

Either way, I was going to end up blindfolded.

I didn't want to do it.

But if I kept hesitating, she'd only get more annoyed—and there was a good chance her next orders would be even worse because of it.

I covered my eyes with the light blue towel.

Blinding myself like this made me feel like I was doing something immoral.

Miyagi seriously had some strange tastes.

「It's kind of lame not being able to see anything, though.」

I complained, even though I couldn't tell where she was anymore.

「This isn't for your entertainment, Sendai-san.」

Her voice came from in front of me.

「So it's supposed to be entertaining for you, then, Miyagi?」

「It's not.」

It wasn't just her tastes—her whole way of thinking was weird.

I didn't see the point in doing something like this if it wasn't even fun for her.

「So, what are you planning to do to me?」

I asked, trying to hide the unease of not being able to see.

But she didn't answer.

「Miyagi?」

I called out to her, assuming she was still in front of me.

Then, I felt her hand on my cheek.

It gently stroked my skin and traced over my lips.

My body stiffened without meaning to.

The memory of being blindfolded during summer break flashed through my mind.

But this time, she pulled her hand away quickly.

She didn't kiss me like she had back then.

「Sendai-san.」

Miyagi said my name quietly.

She wasn't touching me anymore, but I could feel her eyes on me.

I couldn't actually see her, so I couldn't say for sure—but it made me uneasy.

My neck started to feel strangely restless.

「Respond to me.」

She sounded irritated at my silence.

But I still didn't say anything, so she called out to me again.

「Sendai-san.」

「What is it?」

「—— Tell me you hate me.」

「Huh? Where did that come from?」

「Just say it already.」

「Why?」

「It doesn't matter.」

Her voice was calm, but low.

It was the same tone she used whenever she was in a bad mood.

It wasn't unusual for Miyagi to say things that didn't make sense.

She was always unpredictable, and there was rarely any point

in trying to understand the reason behind her actions.

But this time, I felt like I shouldn't follow along without knowing what she meant first.

「What exactly am I supposed to say I hate again?」

I asked, still blindfolded, but lifting my head slightly—trying to match where I imagined her eyes were.

「… Me.」

She muttered.

——I want to see Miyagi's face right now.

Nothing was stopping me from using my hands, so I reached up to the towel over my eyes.

I wanted to take it off and see what kind of face she was making.

But before I could undo the knot, she grabbed my hand and tightened it again.

「I didn't say you could take it off yet.」

I heard Miyagi say. Then, the spot next to where I was sitting sank.

Without any hesitation, she grabbed my arm.

She pulled me toward her, turned my body slightly, and pushed me down.

Thanks to the mattress underneath me, it didn't hurt at all—but I was still a little scared of being handled roughly while I couldn't see a thing.

Just as I was about to complain, Miyagi spoke first.

「This is for not obeying my orders.」

I felt her fingers trail along the chain of the pendant I was

wearing, then tug it out from under my blouse.

She hadn't undone any of the buttons.

She just yanked on the pendant so hard the chain dug into the back of my neck.

「You're pulling too hard. It kind of hurts, and you might break it.」

She was only grabbing onto the pendant charm, so it wasn't like she was choking me or anything.

But still, I was scared she might actually end up doing just that—leaving me unable to breathe.

I couldn't see, so I had no idea what she was thinking, and it made my breathing go shallow.

It felt like all my other senses were heightened.

「Let go already.」

I tried to sound firm, but she kept pulling on the pendant, the chain dragging against my skin and hurting me.

When I finally called her name, she let go.

Then, she bit the side of my neck.

Her teeth sank into my skin, warm but not painful enough to make me say anything.

She soon moved her mouth away, and I felt her fingers trace the spot where she'd bitten me.

She followed the chain of my pendant again, her hand reaching the center of my collarbone.

Then, like it was the most natural thing in the world, she unfastened a button on my blouse and undid my necktie.

At first, I thought she was going to use it to tie my wrists.

But she didn't do anything more.

If she'd really wanted to, she would've tied me up by now—she'd done it before.

But for some reason, she didn't do it today.

'Maybe it's because she wants me to touch her too,' I thought, giving myself a convenient excuse to pull Miyagi towards me.

I wrapped my arms around her back and gently stroked her hair.

She didn't try to push me away.

In fact, it felt like she had no intention of resisting at all.

「—— Do you hate me, Miyagi?」

I asked, combing my fingers through her hair.

「…Yeah.」

She replied after a short pause.

「Then say it clearly. Tell me you hate me. If you do, I'll follow your order from earlier and tell you I hate you too.」

I said as I continued to stroke her hair, then moved my hand to her cheek and traced her lips with my fingertips.

But Miyagi stayed silent.

「I'm not going to get upset, so just say it.」

Still, her lips didn't move.

I pulled my fingers away.

If she told me she hated me, I would've been a little surprised.

She didn't seem to mind that I had my arms around her or that I was stroking her hair—so there was no way she actually hated me.

Miyagi shifted her body slightly away from me and brushed her hand against my pendant again.

Her fingers traced the chain, pressing down on it so hard it felt like the marks might be left on my skin, until she reached the charm.

「Give the necklace back.」

She said as she yanked on the charm so hard I genuinely thought she might break it.

I immediately pulled the towel off my eyes.

This time, I managed to get it off before she could stop me.

The Miyagi in front of me had her brows furrowed.

Her expression was full of displeasure—but also looked like she was about to cry.

My vision was still adjusting after having the towel pressed over my eyes, but even through the blur, there was no mistaking that it was Miyagi in front of me.

「I told you not to take it off on your own, didn't I?」

She let go of the pendant and snatched the towel away from me.

「That aside, why do you want me to give it back?」

「I don't need a reason, do I?」

Her voice wasn't cold, but it was completely devoid of emotion.

I tugged on her blouse.

「Then I'm not giving it back. You were the one who told me to wear it until graduation, weren't you? You should keep your promises.」

「You're the one who's always breaking your promises, Sendai-san.」

She said, sounding irritated as she peeled my hand off her blouse.

「Even if I do, you should keep yours, Miyagi.」

I said, knowing it was selfish, as Miyagi silently tried to tear the pendant off.

「I'm not giving it back.」

I slapped her hand away to emphasize my point.

But even then, she kept trying to take it from me, so I smacked her hand away again.

Finally, the chain that had been digging into my neck loosened as she pulled her hand back.

「Look, Miyagi. We've still got exams coming up, so stop saying weird stuff… It's just going to make me feel depressed.」

I said as I pushed her away and sat up.

「There's nothing for you to be depressed about, Sendai-san.」

Miyagi mumbled as she planted her face in her bed.

「You're such an idiot, Miyagi.」

I hit her with her pillow one more time before getting off the bed.

「So, when's the next time?」

I asked as I stared at her, taking a seat by the table.

Miyagi raised her head and looked over at me.

「Huh?」

「When's the next time you're calling me over? We agreed you'd keep inviting me until graduation, right? So hurry up and decide.」

「… I'll let you know later.」

「You're not actually planning to message me later, are you? I want you to decide right now.」

I pressed her firmly, and Miyagi buried her face into her pillow again.

「Five days from now.」

She said, her voice muffled.

'That's kind of a long time,' I thought.

But we still had exams to get through, and it made sense to spend the time studying, so it wasn't strange for her to tell me to come over in five days.

「Okay. So, what about our optional attendance days?」

I asked about the other thing that had been on my mind.

Starting February, our classes would be optional—students could choose whether to attend or not. Most people didn't plan to go.

Umina and Mariko had already said they wouldn't, and I didn't plan to either.

But I wasn't sure what Miyagi's plans were.

「…」

There was no way she hadn't heard me, but she kept her face buried in the pillow and didn't move at all.

「Miyagi, optional attendance days aren't actually considered days off, you know.」

We'd agreed not to meet unless it was a school day.

But technically, optional attendance days still fell under that.

「Miyagi.」

I called her name again, pressing for an answer.

She finally replied,

「I'll call you over even without you needing to tell me.」

Chapter 35

What I Want From Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part III

Tomorrow was the day we'd promised to meet—five days after we set the date.

When Sendai-san asked about my exam results, I told her they were "okay." That wasn't true. I hadn't done well enough for it to even count as okay. I'd thought I could've done a little better, and saying "okay" didn't sit right with me. But if I'd been honest and she ended up disappointed in me, I wouldn't have been able to stand it.

So, just like how she always made promises she couldn't keep, I ended up lying to her too.

I hated myself for it.

Green peppers, broccoli, shungiku.

On my way back from school, I stopped by the supermarket. As I walked past the vegetable section, I noticed the ones I could never get myself to like—vegetables that reminded me too much of how I felt about myself.

There were other things I didn't like either, such as parsley and—

… I wish I could've said the same about Sendai-san.

In the end, I never got her to tell me she hated me.

I sighed as I tossed some frozen meals and instant ramen into my basket. I thought about grabbing some soda bottles before heading home, but instead, I stopped in my tracks. I turned back toward the vegetable section and added some potatoes and carrots to the basket too.

If only there was a vegetable that could make me smarter just by eating it.

As I wandered through the aisles, I found myself digging through old memories. Somewhere along the way, I'd heard fish was supposed to help with brainpower. But I didn't like fish all that much. And even if I did eat it, it's not like I'd magically get smarter overnight.

I knew it was far too late to start getting anxious now, but part of me was still hoping for some kind of miracle—anything to give me a boost.

If I wanted to get into the same university as Maika, the next exam was the one that would count. As long as I passed that one, everything would work out. My grades had gone up, and even my teachers were backing me to go for it.

But I didn't have much faith in what they said. Or in myself.

I didn't have any in Sendai-san, either.

It'd be nice if I had unwavering faith.

If I could just believe I'd get into university—and if I could trust Sendai-san—then maybe I'd feel okay about seeing her even after graduation.

But the truth was, I wasn't even sure I'd make it into my first-choice school, and I couldn't say for certain whether Sendai-san would actually keep her promises.

And what if I didn't get into the same university as Maika?

I'd end up stuck here.

That thought made me incredibly uneasy.

If I got accepted, of course I'd want to go. But if I didn't, the disappointment would be unbearable. And worse, it'd mean I might have to part ways with Sendai-san for reasons completely out of my control.

If that was going to happen anyway, then maybe it would be better to break things off with her before graduation.

That day… if Sendai-san had told me she hated me, I think I could've walked away even earlier than we'd agreed.

I thought about it as I stood in front of a shelf full of plastic bottles.

I reached out for a bottle of soda—but stopped.

It wasn't like I was trying to put Sendai-san ahead of myself or anything, but between the two bottles in my fridge at home, there was a lot less barley tea left than soda.

「… But having to carry two bottles around is too heavy.」

I'd have to carry everything back myself, and it wasn't practical to bring both. In the end, I gave up on the soda and put a bottle of barley tea in my basket instead.

Then, just before heading to the register, I picked up a pack of beef too.

Ever since I started sharing meals with Sendai-san, my taste had gotten a little more luxurious.

Frozen meals and instant ramen were good, but homemade food was even better—and if I had a choice, I wanted to eat whatever tasted best.

The problem was, the only person who could make me that kind of food was Sendai-san.

Before I even realized it, Sendai-san had become a huge part of me. There were so many marks etched into my memory, and now even my tastes had changed because of her. Most of them were things she'd forced on me without asking, but I could still remember every single one. It was frustrating—no matter how hard I tried to erase her traces, they wouldn't fade.

I paid for my groceries and stepped out of the store.

The cold wind blew through the city as I walked—it was

already the end of January.

The bag in my right hand felt heavy.

Ever since I started sharing meals with Sendai-san, I'd been buying more food. At times like this, I couldn't help but wish she were here to carry the bags. She ate half the food I bought, so it felt like it was only fair.

But for that to happen, we'd have to add a rule that allowed us to shop together, and that sounded like too much trouble. If we had more time together, it might be worth considering—but with so little time left, there was no point. I didn't want to change our rules just so we could shop for groceries, and I didn't need her to carry my bags that badly.

Still, even with all that in mind, the weight in my right hand felt heavier than usual.

I couldn't stop myself from imagining how much lighter it'd feel if she were here.

That thought—one that would never come true—lingered, and now even my head felt heavy.

We'd promised not to see each other anymore after graduation, and I wasn't even sure if I'd get into the university I wanted.

But still, I couldn't help thinking about it.

What if I did get into the same university as Maika?

I was already a liar anyway, so it should be okay for me to break a promise too.

The heavy bags in my hands swung as I picked up my pace.

No, that's not right.

Just because I'd become a liar didn't make it okay to lie.

「I feel like I can't make sense of anything anymore… 」

The more I thought, the more tangled everything became.

I walked even faster.

It didn't feel like I was moving much quicker, but the wind on my cheeks felt colder than before. Maybe it was the bottle of barley tea, but the bag handle felt like it was digging into my hand.

I hurried back to my apartment and put the contents of the bag in the fridge.

Then I went to my room, turned on the air conditioner, and changed out of my clothes.

I lay down on my bed, pulled out the manga Sendai-san had been reading four days ago from under the black cat sitting by my pillow, and started flipping through the pages.

The whole time, my emotions were wavering.

I didn't want to see Sendai-san tomorrow, and yet I really wanted to see her.

I wasn't dumb—I knew those feelings were contradictory.

Lately, I kept bouncing between not wanting to see her and wanting to.

And once I did see her, I'd just want to keep seeing her.

So maybe it'd be easier if we just stopped meeting.

But I knew that even if we didn't, I still wanted to see her.

It was difficult juggling these thoughts and feelings.

I couldn't help wishing I could go back to this time last year.

If I could turn back time, I'd end our relationship before we ever switched classrooms.

That way, I wouldn't have to think about any of this. I could just pick a local university and be content staying here.

Sendai-san really should've told me she hated me that day.

She was always so cruel.

I closed the manga I was flipping through and tapped the black cat plush on the head, but it didn't make a sound.

It didn't complain like Sendai-san always did.

How boring, I thought, tapping the cat's head again.

Even though I didn't want tomorrow to come, I still found myself wishing it would hurry up and get here.

If only that part of me could just go away.

What I Want From Sendai-san (II)

Part 112

I moved the black cat plush from beside my pillow to the bookshelf.

The intercom rang just as I was replying to text messages from Maika and Ami.

As agreed, I had sent a message to Sendai-san five days after we last met that said, 『Come over now.』

So the person at the door was probably her.

I checked the intercom and saw Sendai-san on the other side of the monitor.

She'd shown up later than I expected.

When I wrote "come over now," I meant immediately.

But she'd kept me waiting quite a while since I sent the message.

After complaining to her through the intercom, I unlocked the apartment building's entrance for her.

A little later, the doorbell rang. I opened the front door and let Sendai-san in as she grumbled.

「I did try getting here as fast I could, you know.」

「You took way too long.」

Even if I was hesitant about seeing her, if someone says to come over, that means come over right away.

「I don't think I could've gotten here any faster unless I flew over or something.」

「Then you should've just flown over.」

「If you can prove to me that you're able to fly, then I'll give it a try next time.」

Sendai-san said, her expression annoyed as she took off her shoes.

I let out a small sigh as I got ready to hand her a five-thousand-yen bill.

The five-thousand-yen bill was payment for some of Sendai-san's time, so I didn't feel bad about giving it to her.

But I couldn't help wondering—

What would happen if I didn't pay her?

Would she still be willing to come over?

It was something I'd always wanted to ask her.

I remembered that Sendai-san had once asked me, "What if I told you I didn't need it?"

Back then, I should've made her explain what she meant.

I really wanted to know what she would've done if I'd actually listened to her that day and decided not to hand over the five-thousand-yen bill.

「Sendai-san.」

A relationship between us without a price attached.

I tried to imagine something like that—something that could actually happen right now—and for a moment, it made me hesitate to give her the five-thousand-yen bill in my hand.

But I quickly brushed the thought aside and held it out in front of her face.

「Here.」

As always, I felt the bill being tugged from the other end, and my fingers instinctively tightened around it.

But before I could accidentally say anything, I let go.

「Thanks.」

Sendai-san said as she put the bill away.

I had no value beyond that five-thousand-yen bill.

If I didn't properly compensate her for her time, then her time wouldn't belong to me.

And if her time didn't belong to me, I wouldn't be allowed to give her orders.

And if she didn't have to follow my orders, then there'd be no reason for her to come over to my place at all.

「I'm going to get us something to drink.」

I said, turning my back to her.

「Okay, I'll go and wait for you then.」

Soon after, I heard the sound of a door closing.

I walked down the hallway to the kitchen.

I pulled out two cups and opened the fridge.

Inside were two plastic bottles—one with less liquid than the other, and a brand-new bottle of barley tea I'd bought yesterday.

I took out the soda and the fresh barley tea and poured them into the cups.

Placing them on a tray, I returned to my room, where I found Sendai-san sitting in her usual spot.

「Make dinner for us tonight.」

I said, placing the cups on the table and taking a seat beside

her.

「Is that supposed to be today's order?」

If there was something I truly wanted in exchange for five-thousand yen, it would be to buy an unbreakable promise.

If I could buy something like that, maybe then I'd be able to let myself trust Sendai-san.

Then, even if we went to different universities, it'd be okay to meet up now and then, have a few meals together, hang out.

But there was no way I could ask for something like that from her.

And no way I could bind someone to me for life with just a five-thousand-yen bill.

Besides, it wasn't something I could order her to do while I was still trying to distance myself from her.

「That's right. It doesn't matter what you make, just as long as you're the one cooking.」

Instead, I gave her an order that felt appropriately worth five-thousand yen, as I looked at her.

「You're saying I can make anything, but isn't your fridge empty?」

「It's not.」

「Then can I go and see what you have?」

「Fine, but I'm coming with you.」

I replied as Sendai-san stood up from the table, where her reference books were still spread out. We headed to the kitchen together.

After flipping on the lights in the living room and kitchen, Sendai-san walked over and opened the fridge. She peeked inside, then checked the freezer and vegetable compartment before turning

to face me.

「Are you a big fan of potatoes and carrots or something?」

「They're okay. Why?」

「You always have them. I figured maybe you really liked them or something.」

「I don't always have them. I just never know what kind of ingredients I'm supposed to buy, that's all.」

「You should just buy whatever you want to eat.」

「I never know what I want to eat, though.」

I usually just ate whatever was around.

Because of that, even if I wanted her to make something for me, I never knew what to ask for. I didn't even know what I wanted to eat.

And since I'd never really been interested in cooking, I'd made it all the way to the end of high school without even figuring out what kinds of ingredients I should be buying.

「Alright, then how about we go grocery shopping together? It'd be way easier for me to cook things for you if we had a plan in mind and just bought what we needed instead of making do with whatever's lying around.」

It wasn't the greatest idea, but Sendai-san suggested it in a cheerful tone.

Going shopping together and sharing the weight of the heavy bags.

It was something I'd thought about just yesterday, but I never imagined those same words would come from Sendai-san's mouth too.

Hearing her say that made me feel like, maybe even after we graduated, we might end up standing in the same kitchen again someday.

But that future was one that probably wouldn't come true.

「If you're that set on it, then you can go and buy the ingredients. I'll give you the money for it.」

「Is there no way I can talk you into coming with me?」

「Nope.」

Being with Sendai-san made me afraid of going back to being alone. Technically speaking, even if she disappeared from my life, I wouldn't really be alone. I had friends, and once I got to university, I'd probably make new ones too. But even so, I knew I relied on Sendai-san too much—so much that once she was gone, I'd probably feel like I was all alone.

If I kept depending on her like this, I wouldn't be able to stand on my own once she was no longer around.

That would only make things harder for me, so I needed to start doing things on my own, by myself.

「Well, in that case, we don't need to change anything. You can keep buying the ingredients yourself, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san sighed as she said that and made her way to the living room. Even though she wasn't about to eat, she sat down in a chair by the counter table.

「Also, wouldn't it be better if you just hired a housekeeper or something to make your meals, instead of paying me to cook for you?」

She asked casually, showing no intentions of going back to my room, so I had no choice but to go stand beside her.

「I don't like letting strangers into the apartment.」

After my mother was gone, there was a period when someone would come by to cook or clean. I wasn't sure if they qualified as a housekeeper, but I just remembered feeling uneasy having a stranger in the house.

「I'm technically a stranger too, you know.」

「Sendai-san, you're—」

I wanted to say special, but I stopped myself.

That wasn't something I could say so lightly.

「I'm what?」

Sendai-san asked with a grin.

「You are a stranger, but it's fine since we were classmates once.」

「So does that mean you'd let other classmates in too?」

「Does that matter? More importantly, have you decided on what to make yet?」

Wanting to escape Sendai-san's gaze, who looked like she still had more to say, I changed the subject.

「I haven't decided on anything yet.」

「Then hurry up and think of something.」

I didn't really care what we had for dinner.

If we were going to waste this much time on it, I'd honestly rather be studying instead.

But Sendai-san seemed way more focused on figuring out what to make. She sat beside me, deep in thought.

「Even if you tell me to hurry up… Well, I've already made stuff like curry and stew before. Hmm, maybe nikujaga? Oh, but you don't have any onions.」

Muttering to herself, she just so happened to mention something I actually wanted to eat.

「You know how to make nikujaga?」

「Is that what you want to eat?」

「If you can make it, yeah.」

「I don't really know how, so I'll need to go and look it up. Still, you don't have onions, so I don't know how good it'll turn out.」

「Then it's your job to make it taste good without them.」

I didn't mind being short on ingredients.

But I still wanted her to make something tasty even without them.

「I'll do what I can, but I can't make any promises.」

With that, Sendai-san stood up and headed into the kitchen. After checking what was in the fridge and looking through the seasonings, she mentioned she was going back to my room.

What I Want From Sendai-san (III)

Part 113

Spending time with Sendai-san in my room made me think about how little time we had left together, and that thought left me feeling down.

Back in late January, we'd made nikujaga together, and now it was already February. Whether I liked it or not, the graduation ceremony was just a month away.

「Wanna take a break, Miyagi?」

After writing beside me with her pencil for two hours, Sendai-san nudged me and asked.

「Sure.」

I knew I needed to study, but rushing wouldn't suddenly make me able to do things I hadn't managed before. And there was no point forcing myself to keep going if I couldn't concentrate.

I set my pencil down and looked over at her.

It hadn't been that long since I last saw her, but for some reason, it felt like it had been a while.

Maybe it was because I hadn't gone to school at all since February started.

Maika and Ami had both said they weren't planning on going in during the optional attendance period, and I didn't want to either if I didn't have to.

The optional attendance days had only just begun, but so long as I stayed home, I wouldn't run into Sendai-san by chance.

Since I could only see her if I invited her over, maybe that was why it felt like so much time had passed since the last time.

「So, Miyagi, what've you been doing since the optional attendance days started?」

Sendai-san asked, like she was just making conversation.

「Studying.」

I didn't like studying, but I felt restless if I wasn't doing it, so that was how I'd been spending most of my time.

「Right. Have you gone to school at all?」

「No. Maika and Ami aren't going either, so it'd just be boring. You haven't been going either, right, Sendai-san?」

She was wearing casual clothes today instead of her school uniform, which meant she'd come straight from home.

Even if I had gone to school, I wouldn't have seen her there anyway.

「Well, yeah.」

Sendai-san replied without much energy.

I glanced at the notebook lying open in front of her.

Her writing was tidy, though some letters spilled outside the ruled lines.

Even so, I thought it looked really neat and clean.

Just like her outer appearance.

She always looked put-together. Even though parts of her look went against school rules, she kept things neat enough that teachers wouldn't scold her.

Whenever I was beside her, I couldn't help but wish I was more like her.

She had beautiful handwriting, was good at studying, and was attractive too.

If I could be like that, maybe I'd feel a little more confident in myself.

I let out a quiet sigh so Sendai-san wouldn't hear, then shifted toward my bed and leaned against it.

I shut my eyes tight, blocking out the characters on her notebook from view.

After stretching a bit and opening my eyes again, I noticed her long hair.

She wasn't in her school uniform today, but unlike during winter break, she was wearing a blouse instead of a turtleneck. Even so, her hair hid her neck.

Her hair looked pretty, even without a braid, but I couldn't tell if she was wearing the necklace.

I reached out and gently tugged on her hair.

「What is it?」

Sendai-san asked, glancing at me.

I could just order her to show me, since I paid her five-thousand yen today.

I ran my fingers through her hair again, then let go.

I'm sure she's wearing it today.

Every time I'd checked, it had always been there.

「It's nothing.」

I said flatly and sat up straight, moving away from the bed.

Sendai-san undid a button on her blouse. Before I could ask what she was doing, she pulled the necklace out from underneath.

「Here.」

She said, as if it were only natural, while looking at me.

「I never asked you to show it to me.」

「You looked like you were about to.」

「I wasn't. It didn't even cross my mind.」

「Is that so?」

She replied dryly, tucking the necklace back in. But she left her blouse button undone and tugged on the hood of my hoodie.

「Hey, you remember I told you to let me know if you pass your entrance exam, right?」

「I do.」

There's no way I'd forget.

That promise with Sendai-san was probably the reason I'd been feeling so anxious.

What if things didn't go well?

I'd end up having to tell Sendai-san that I failed.

Our promise only required me to tell her if I did pass, so technically, I didn't have to say anything if I failed. But if I stayed silent, she'd figure it out anyway, so not telling her wasn't really an option.

If I had to say something either way, I'd much rather it be that I passed.

「You think you'll be okay for the exam?」

Sendai-san asked, her tone unchanged.

「I'll probably be fine.」

「That's good, then.」

'That's good?'

I had no clue what was supposed to be good about any of this.

I was lying when I said I'd probably be fine. I still didn't have any confidence in myself.

Sendai-san hadn't noticed at all.

I knew she couldn't have picked up on how I felt unless I actually said it out loud, but still—I couldn't help thinking that she should've noticed anyway.

「Sendai-san, cast a charm on me.」

「Is that today's order?」

「Yeah.」

「When you say 'charm,' do you mean like the one I did last time?」

Sendai-san asked, resting her chin in her hand.

「You said it would guarantee results, right?」

I knew the charm she did last time wasn't a real one. It felt more like a joke meant to make me uncomfortable than anything magical. So of course, I didn't believe it would actually help.

But still—when Sendai-san, who was good at everything, touched me, it felt like I was getting even just a little bit of her strength.

「Give me your hand.」

Sendai-san said as she turned to face me.

I held my hand out like I was told, and she gently took it. Just like last time, her lips brushed against my fingertips.

I thought it was unfair how good she looked even in moments like this.

Feeling uneasy, I tugged lightly on her bangs. Unlike the order she'd done it in last time, her lips went up to the second joint of my

middle finger.

This wasn't going to suddenly give me more confidence, but somehow, it felt better than doing nothing at all. Even if I couldn't become more like Sendai-san, at least it eased some of my anxiety about studying.

Her lips touched the base of my finger.

Then, something warm traced along the back of my hand.

If it were a dog or a cat doing this to me, I probably would've found it cute. But that wasn't the case with Sendai-san. The feeling in my chest was different—probably because I didn't look at her with the same kind of pure affection I felt for animals.

I hoped she didn't do this kind of thing with anyone else.

I wanted to be the only one who got to feel her body heat up close like this.

The tongue that had been licking the back of my hand stopped, and then she kissed my palm. But she only kissed it once before lifting her head.

「Is that it?」

I asked, and she responded by tightening her grip on my hand.

I didn't grip back, but since I hadn't pulled away either, Sendai-san said, "Not yet."

Without warning, she pushed up the sleeve of my hoodie to my elbow. As I watched her, she brought her lips to the inside of my arm and sucked hard.

It hurt, like I was being pricked by needles.

It felt like countless needles were entering my body from where her lips touched me. The pain shouldn't have been that intense, but it felt far worse than it should've. The needles flowed through my bloodstream, all converging at my heart, where they kept pricking it relentlessly.

She moved her lips, shifted their position, and sucked again.

Like before, it hurt more than it should have.

After leaving two marks behind, Sendai-san looked up at me.

「Is this supposed to be part of the charm too?」

I asked, even though I already knew it wasn't a real charm.

She answered, "It is."

The spot where she'd left the marks still felt hot.

Sendai-san kissed one of them before pulling my sleeve back down.

「Will this charm actually work?」

「It will. Trust me.」

「I don't trust it because it's you, Sendai-san.」

I couldn't really believe in it when the marks were just going to fade away so quickly.

If they stayed all the way until the exam results were out, then maybe I'd be able to believe in them. But there was no way they'd last that long.

「It'll work. Really. Have a little faith in me for once.」

Sendai-san said irresponsibly.

「Will you take responsibility if I don't pass?」

「Sure.」

「How?」

「I'll let you decide.」

Sendai-san was always leaving it to me.

She always pushed the decision onto me.

But I knew she was just joking around like always, so it'd be dumb to seriously consider what she said. There was no point playing along anymore, so I decided to end the break here and picked up my pencil.

But before I could do anything, Sendai-san snatched it from my hand.

「What? I thought you finished casting the charm.」

「Nope. Not yet.」

She said, tracing her fingers over my lips.

「Whatever you're trying to do now, it definitely isn't part of the charm, is it?」

I grabbed her wrist and moved her hand away.

「It is.」

「You're just trying to kiss me, aren't you?」

Sendai-san didn't answer.

She didn't confirm or deny it.

She just reached for my lips again in silence, so I pushed her away.

「Miyagi.」

Even though I didn't give her permission to keep going with the charm, she leaned in close.

So I leaned in too—and bumped my forehead into hers.

A dull thud echoed in my skull.

「Ouch!」

Sendai-san exclaimed, pressing her hand to her forehead.

I did the same.

「Are you stupid or something? That really hurt.」

「It's your fault, Sendai-san. It hurt for me too.」

I didn't mean to hit her that hard, but it ended up hurting way more than I expected.

「I'm not gonna care if you forget everything you studied because of that.」

「Even if I forget a few things, it's fine. I'll just keep studying to make up for it. Besides, I'm not going to see you again until the exams are over, Sendai-san.」

「Wait, what? Is that supposed to be payback or something?」

「No.」

I didn't think not inviting her over counted as payback.

But that didn't mean I'd firmly decided not to see her until the exams either.

It was just something I'd been thinking about since yesterday.

「But there's still quite a bit of time until exams, right?」

「Yeah, but I'll be spending all that time studying.」

「You don't want to study together?」

Sendai-san asked, her voice a little quieter than before.

「I'm planning to study on my own. You've got your own exams to worry about too, don't you, Sendai-san?」

It wasn't that I couldn't study with her—she always answered my questions, and studying with her was way better than doing it alone.

But right now, I wanted to do whatever I could on my own, by

myself.

「Okay, I get it. We've both got to do our best, huh.」

Sendai-san replied, looking displeased as she closed my reference book on the table.

She shut my notebook too, and started putting my pencil and eraser back into the pencil case.

「Sendai-san, I just said I was going to keep studying.」

I opened my reference book and notebook again, but she reached over and closed them once more.

「Hey, Miyagi.」

I didn't answer.

I didn't want to respond to someone who was obviously trying to be annoying.

「Don't just ask me to cast a charm on you. Order me to kiss you instead.」

Sendai-san said as she grabbed my hand.

「I'm not going to do that.」

「We're not going to be seeing each other for a while, right?」

「What about it?」

「Don't you want to do it too?」

「I'll be fine even without it.」

「I see.」

She said with an uninterested tone and let go of my hand, leaning against the bed without saying anything more.

Normally, she'd push until I was backed into a corner and gave her what she wanted, but today, she backed off so easily that it

left me feeling uneasy.

That was why I said what I did next.

「— If you want to do it that badly, then just do it.」

「Is that an order?」

「Sendai-san, you really want to be ordered around, huh?」

She didn't respond.

Instead, Sendai-san sat up from where she'd been leaning and brought her face closer to mine.

Before her lips approached, her fingers softly grazed my cheek.

Our eyes met.

I stared back at her, but since she didn't close her eyes, I closed mine first.

Then, her lips touched mine.

It felt like it'd been a long time since we last kissed.

Her lips were softer than the hand stroking my cheek.

She pulled back slightly—then immediately leaned in for another kiss, but I pushed her away by the shoulders.

「Miyagi.」

「No more.」

I replied curtly, gripping my own arm tightly.

Then, I reopened the reference book and notebook that Sendai-san had closed earlier.

Chapter 36

The Time Left for Me and Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)

Part 114

"We're not going to see each other again until the exams are over."

That was the reasonable, logical suggestion Miyagi had made the other day. And now, with all the exams behind us, she was lounging around like it was nothing.

Both of us had taken everything we needed to take. The results weren't out yet, but we'd already done what we had to do, so things should've felt easier now.

But Miyagi didn't look relaxed at all—she was clearly in a bad mood. Probably because the first thing I did when I saw her was ask how her exams went.

I knew I shouldn't have said anything the moment I opened my mouth, but I did it anyway.

Bringing this was probably a mistake, I thought, glancing down at my bag. Inside were the chocolates I'd debated taking with me right up until the last second after Miyagi invited me over. Now, it felt like I'd completely missed the moment, and I couldn't think of any reason to pull them out.

Miyagi was lying in bed, clearly not in the mood to be accepting chocolates.

Valentine's Day had already passed, too, since we'd agreed not to see each other until exams were done, so it wasn't easy to justify giving her chocolates now. On top of that, I didn't even know if her exams had gone well.

This year felt so different from last year that just thinking about it made me feel oddly nostalgic. Last year, I'd given her chocolates without thinking twice.

Not going to school because of the optional attendance days only made it harder to hand them over.

Last year, I made chocolates for Umina and the others too, and gave Miyagi some as part of that. But this year, it really felt like I'd made them just for her.

I wasn't the kind of person who cared much about seasonal stuff like this, but if friends were involved, I usually went along with

it—and that's why I did things like this.

Today was no different.

Last year, Miyagi told me she didn't exchange chocolates with her friends, but I gave her some anyway.

I'd planned to do the same this year, but without being able to use the excuse that I made them for other friends too, it was hard to find a reason.

I stood up and walked over to the bookshelf.

I ran my hand over the black cat plush sitting in front of the manga and glanced through the shelves to see if there were any new volumes. That's when I heard her voice behind me.

「Sendai-san, take this.」

When I turned around, Miyagi had gotten out of bed. She was standing there holding out a small box tied with a ribbon. It wasn't very big or thick.

「Wait, is this…?」

I went back to the table without grabbing any manga, and she handed me the box.

「It caught my eye when I went shopping the other day.」

I sat down, staring at the box in my hands.

No matter how you looked at it, it was wrapped in full-on Valentine's Day packaging, complete with a brand name printed on it. There was no mistaking that it was Valentine's chocolate.

But still—there was no way Miyagi, of all people, would give me something like that.

「… What's this for? Niboshi Day?」

Miyagi had called Valentine's Day that last year.

I remembered it clearly.

With that in mind, I honestly wouldn't have been surprised if the box really did have dried sardines in it.

I glanced over at Miyagi, sitting beside me.

She looked annoyed, like always.

「Last year, you were the one who told me to stop acting like some bitter, lonely guy. If you don't want it, then just give it back.」

Judging from that, it was probably chocolates in the box.

「No, I'll take it. Thanks. I brought some for you too.」

I quickly opened my bag and pulled out the box of chocolates. There was no better time than now.

「Here you go. It's a bit late, but here's your share. They're homemade.」

I said as I handed her the box, wrapped in light pink paper. It wasn't the smoothest way to give it to her, but I didn't have time to worry about appearances.

「You made chocolates for Ibaraki-san and the others too,

even though you haven't been going to school?」

Maybe because I'd made it sound like I'd prepared chocolates for other people, Miyagi responded like it was a given.

「Well, maybe… But anyway, you can open it now if you want. Can I open this too?」

I told a lie I didn't need to.

For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to admit that I'd made them just for her.

「Do whatever you want.」

Miyagi replied flatly as she started peeling the wrapping paper off the box.

I carefully unwrapped mine too, trying not to tear the paper.

Inside were six chocolates—

The same number I'd given her last year.

Not that I thought Miyagi remembered and tried to match me.

It was probably just a coincidence, but even so, getting the same amount made me happy—especially since I'd gotten nothing from her for White Day.

I did wish she'd looked a little happier while giving it to me, but if she had, I probably would've thought the world was about to end.

「Oh, right. Want me to feed them to you like I did last year?」

I asked, pointing at the chocolates Miyagi was holding.

They were the same truffles I'd made last year, and I'd even kept the number the same. I'd considered making something different this time, but thought something too elaborate would come off as over-the-top, so I gave up on the idea.

「No, I can eat it myself just fine.」

Miyagi said as she picked up a piece of white chocolate dusted with powdered sugar. It was small enough that she ate it in one bite.

Her expression didn't change.

She didn't say anything either, so I had no way of knowing whether she thought it tasted good or not.

Her fingers hovered over the box for a moment, as if unsure about picking another one, but then she reached for the back of the crocodile-covered tissue box and pulled out a sheet.

「Was it good?」

I asked as she wiped her fingertips, and she quietly replied, "Yes."

「… Thank you.」

She'd thanked me like this last year too, but even so, I felt relieved.

I would've preferred if she'd told me it was delicious outright,

but hearing her thank me still made me happy. Technically, she didn't say it was delicious—she only answered "yes" to my question—but I hadn't expected such a straightforward reply from Miyagi in the first place.

「Are you not going to eat any, Sendai-san?」

「I will.」

「Then hand that over to me.」

Miyagi said, pointing to the chocolates in front of me.

「Is that an order?」

「It is.」

「You're not trying to take them back, are you?」

I didn't think that was what she meant, but I asked just in case.

「I never said that.」

Relieved by her answer, I handed her the box without protest.

「Open your mouth.」

Miyagi said as she picked up a square piece of chocolate.

「… Uh, what's happening?」

I instinctively leaned back.

She was probably just trying to feed me the chocolate.

But that alone was weird.

There was no way it was just that.

Miyagi was trying to make me eat something.

She'd done this kind of thing before, and nothing good ever came out of it.

The fact that she'd even prepared chocolates for me was already a miracle—so there was no way she was trying to feed them to me in a normal, straightforward way.

She even tried to order me to eat it.

There had to be something going on.

It wouldn't be like Miyagi otherwise.

「Fine. If you want to eat it yourself, I don't care.」

She said flatly, trying to put the chocolate back into the box—but I quickly grabbed her hand.

「Wait, sorry. Feed it to me.」

I had no idea what might happen if I let her feed me.

But in the end, it was an order.

Even if something unpleasant came out of it, I'd just have to accept it—so there was no point in overthinking it.

「Okay. Then, your mouth?」

She hadn't told me to open it this time, but I did anyway.

A square piece of chocolate came toward me—then gently entered my mouth, along with her finger.

Miyagi's fingertip brushed against my tongue.

The chocolate, warmed by my body heat, was already starting to melt, and her finger tasted sweet too.

When I bit into the chocolate—and lightly onto her finger—she pulled her hand away.

Only the chocolate was left in my mouth.

It wasn't too sweet, but not too bitter either.

I stared at Miyagi.

She wasn't doing anything weird.

She didn't reach for another chocolate either.

The order had gone surprisingly smoothly, and nothing strange had happened.

「Is it good?」

Miyagi asked, echoing the question I'd asked her earlier, as she wiped her fingers with a tissue.

「Do you want to try some too?」

The chocolate tasted great.

But I didn't want to use words to tell her that.

「I gave them to you, Sendai-san. I don't need any.」

「You don't have to worry about that.」

I grabbed Miyagi's arm.

When I gently pulled her toward me, her brows furrowed. But she didn't say anything, so I brought her closer and pressed my lips to hers.

The last time we'd kissed was the day she asked me to cast a charm on her.

That had been over a week ago.

Maybe because of the time that had passed, she let me kiss her without resistance.

I slipped my tongue between her lips.

Miyagi gripped my arm, but didn't push me away.

She wasn't exactly kissing me back, but she allowed my tongue to enter her mouth.

Normally, Miyagi would've gotten annoyed by now, saying I'd gone beyond just letting her have a taste. But today, she was unusually quiet. It made me feel a bit uneasy, but I didn't want to stop, so I pressed my tongue lightly against hers.

She didn't flinch when I touched her tongue, so I pressed in deeper until they twined together.

Miyagi's fingers clutched my arm more tightly, and I could feel her body heat through her damp tongue.

It was warmer than the hand gripping me, and it made my heart race.

I couldn't taste the chocolate anymore.

But I was sure it had been sweet.

Wanting to feel her even more, I deepened the kiss.

It was hot, sweet, almost suffocating.

I couldn't breathe properly, and finally, I pulled away.

Rather than her getting a taste of the chocolate, it felt more like I'd gotten a taste of Miyagi instead—so I wouldn't be surprised if she got mad at me for that.

「How am I supposed to know how it tastes when you do that?」

Miyagi said as she pushed me back by the shoulders, putting some space between us.

「Then let's keep going until you do know.」

「It'd be a lot easier if I just ate one myself.」

She didn't sound mad, but her voice was quiet as she reached for the box of chocolates meant for me.

Before she could grab one, I took hold of her wrist and pulled her hand away from the box.

「Sendai-san.」

Miyagi sounded exasperated, but she still didn't tell me to stop.

So I kissed her again without hesitation.

Her lips were already slightly parted this time, and I slipped my tongue in more easily.

I still couldn't taste the chocolate, but the kiss was undeniably sweet.

Wanting more, I pushed my tongue deeper into her mouth.

Miyagi's hands moved to my shoulders.

Then, she dug her nails into my skin—hard. It hurt.

Normally, she would've pushed me away by now.

And the fact that she hadn't was starting to bother me, so I pulled back.

「You're not going to get mad at me today?」

I asked, and her brows furrowed again.

「If you already know I'm going to get mad, then don't do stuff like this in the first place.」

Miyagi said, sounding irritated.

But still, she hadn't gotten mad.

The Time Left for Me and Miyagi (II)

Part 115

The world was probably going to end tomorrow.

Or at least, if someone said it would, I wouldn't even question it.

That's how strange Miyagi had been acting lately.

Ever since we exchanged chocolates, she'd called me over to her place a few times—but not once had she gotten angry, or given me any weird orders. She still wasn't exactly cheerful, but she was more talkative than usual, and she even let me kiss her.

It didn't feel real.

This couldn't be the Miyagi I knew.

But then again, maybe this was normal.

It's not weird for people to hold conversations or treat others calmly, even if they're just acquaintances. In that sense, Miyagi was simply acting like a regular person now. Maybe this was the same version of herself she always showed Utsunomiya and the others.

Maybe I was the weird one for feeling unsettled by it.

I leaned against my bed and glanced over the piggy bank sitting on my drawer, stuffed full of five-thousand-yen bills.

I didn't know how many were in there. But for a moment, I wished it were empty.

If Miyagi had never started paying me, we probably wouldn't have gotten this close.

And if we weren't close, I wouldn't be stuck thinking about her all the time. I'd just be worrying about myself and spring break instead.

Everything felt like such a hassle.

Miyagi. Myself. All of it.

It would've been easier if I could just enjoy this "new" Miyagi—someone who wasn't giving strange orders, who was acting more friendly.

But for some reason, the nicer she was, the more it felt like something was wrong.

When I really thought about it, I didn't have any good memories of her acting this way.

So I couldn't help but doubt her.

Everything she did now felt like it had some hidden motive behind it.

If I were Utsunomiya, maybe I could accept it all without second-guessing it.

Maybe I'd even feel so happy about it that I'd start to believe our promise to stop seeing each other after graduation might be called off.

But I couldn't bring myself accept it.

I didn't believe Miyagi hated me—if she did, she wouldn't let me touch her or kiss her.

Still, even though it looked like she was accepting me, it didn't feel like she really was.

It was like she was only pretending to be kind.

And the more I found myself wishing she'd break our promise, the more I felt like that would never happen.

She still hadn't told me her exam results either, even though they'd already been released.

I'd already told her I'd gotten into the school I wanted to attend, and she even congratulated me.

But Miyagi still hadn't told me her results, even though she promised she would.

It wasn't like I had no other way of finding out whether she passed or not, but I'd been waiting patiently.

She should just hurry up and tell me already.

A simple message like "I passed" or "I failed" would've been enough.

「Hurry up and contact me already.」

Idiot, I thought, and stood up.

Then, I flopped onto my bed and shut my eyes.

It was only a little past nine—too early to sleep.

I hadn't even taken a bath yet.

But I didn't feel like moving.

As I sighed, my phone buzzed next to me. I glanced at the screen.

「…Miyagi.」

Her name slipped out of my mouth.

The timing was so uncanny it felt like she'd been eavesdropping.

「She's not about to tell me she didn't get in, is she?」

I took a deep breath and slowly let it out.

It felt wrong to assume the worst right away, but what else was I supposed to think when she hadn't told me anything? I wanted to hope for good news, but I couldn't bring myself to believe in it.

「Hello?」

I spoke into the phone in a voice that was neither cheerful nor

gloomy, and the ringtone was replaced by Miyagi's voice on the other end.

「I got in.」

「Huh?」

「I got accepted to the same university as Maika. That's all.」

「Wait—what? Oh. You got in?」

After making me wait so long, that was all she said.

Her announcement was so blunt, I couldn't even think of the questions I'd wanted to ask.

Was she really planning to go to the same school as Utsunomiya?

She hadn't promised to tell me that part, but I still wanted to know.

But before I could ask, Miyagi spoke again.

「Also, there's a movie I want to watch.」

「A movie?」

The sudden change in topic threw me off so badly that everything I'd meant to say vanished.

Before I could even remember to congratulate her, she said,

「Yeah.」

The conversation was moving too fast for me to keep up.

Despite the good news, Miyagi wasn't in a great mood, and her silence made it even harder to say what I was thinking.

But Miyagi was always like this—

She'd say whatever she wanted without thinking about anyone else, and go silent whenever it suited her.

And I was the one getting yanked around by her moods—but even so, I couldn't stop caring about her. I knew I was the one always on the losing end, but I couldn't let go. Even now, I was trying to think of the right words just so I could talk to her.

「That's all.」

Miyagi said quietly.

But I knew it wasn't.

She was waiting for me to keep the conversation going.

「Was that your way of inviting me to the movies?」

「If you don't want to be invited, then forget it.」

「So? When were you planning to go?」

Miyagi told me the date she'd been planning to go—as if she'd had it figured out in advance.

That's such bad timing, I thought to myself.

「I do want to go with you, but I've already got plans that day. Can we reschedule?」

I could hear her grumble on the other end of the line.

Somehow, what started as a call about her exam results had

turned into a conversation about going to the movies. But if I forced the topic back to exams now, I had no doubt she'd never bring up the movie again. So for now, I had to prioritize the movie.

Besides, university stuff was better talked about in person anyway. If I pushed her to talk about it now, she might end up saying something I didn't want to hear.

「Fine. We can move it to an earlier day.」

"Sure," I replied, and she told me the time and place.

It was the same as the time and place we'd gone to see a movie together during summer break. That small detail made my heart flutter.

It was rare for Miyagi to invite me to the movies, and the fact that she'd chosen the exact same day and place as last time made me feel strangely uneasy. I wanted to ask what she was thinking, but before I could, Miyagi spoke up.

「Sendai-san.」

「What is it?」

「What were your other plans?」

「Well, now that I've finalized my university plans, I was thinking of going around and checking out apartments.」

That was something I'd decided to do after getting into the school I was aiming for. I could've waited until spring break, but people from my prep school said it was better to do it early.

「What about you, Miyagi?」

「What do you mean?」

「If you're going to a university outside the prefecture, don't you have to look for an apartment too?」

It felt like I was allowed to ask her that much. It also conveniently tied back to her university plans.

「I don't know. I might just stay here, you know.」

「And if you don't stay?」

「… I guess I'll live in a dorm or something.」

「Wouldn't you hate that? Living with other people?」

「My dad's busy and doesn't have time to help me look for a place. If the dorms don't work out, I'll figure something else out later.」

From the way she talked, it sounded like her mind was already made up: she was planning to attend the same university as Utsunomiya and live in the dorms.

But I had the feeling that if I pushed her any harder, she'd shut down and insist she wasn't going after all.

「You're just going to wing it, huh. Well, whatever. Anyway, what movie are we watching?」

「What do you want to see, Sendai-san?」

「Uh, weren't you the one who said there was a movie you wanted to watch?」

I really wanted to pry further.

What Miyagi was saying now didn't match what she'd said earlier.

「I just wanted to ask, just in case. Don't forget—we're meeting tomorrow. Good night.」

Her voice was cold, and without waiting for a reply, she abruptly hung up.

Saying whatever she wanted, hanging up whenever she felt like it—

That was just like Miyagi.

She'd been acting strange lately, and today was no different.

But at the same time, she was still the same selfish Miyagi I knew.

There was something unsettling about the way she'd been behaving recently, but at the same time, I felt oddly content knowing she was planning to move into a dorm.

I set my phone back down beside my pillow.

Closing my eyes, I started thinking about tomorrow.

What were we going to do after the movie?

What would our university life be like?

And finally, I wanted to ask Miyagi what was going to happen between us after we graduated.

I wasn't sure she'd give me the answer I wanted, and I wasn't confident about asking either—but I still wanted to.

I opened my eyes and let out a deep sigh.

The Time Left for Me and Miyagi (III)

Part 116

The movie ran for about two hours before the credits began to roll.

Miyagi and I waited until the very end before getting up from our seats.

I adjusted my skirt and started walking.

If it had been Umina or Mariko, they would've stood up as soon as the movie ended, treating the credits like nothing more than a bonus. If I'd come with them, I would've had to follow suit, which is why I never really enjoyed watching movies with them.

But Miyagi was the type to stay in her seat until the lights came on. She'd done the same thing when we watched a movie together during summer break. Our personalities and hobbies were completely different, yet this was one thing we had in common.

Even with Umina and Mariko, there were differences between us, but I still had more in common with them than with Miyagi.

And yet, for some reason, I often had more fun with Miyagi than anyone else.

「Did you enjoy the movie?」

Miyagi asked as we exited the theater.

「Hmm, what did you think of the movie, Miyagi?」

「I thought it was interesting.」

「Same. I don't usually watch action movies, but I liked this one.」

Miyagi had originally said there was a movie she wanted to see, but in the end, she never mentioned which one, so we ended up watching a popular action flick instead.

There was also a horror movie we could've watched, but I knew she wasn't good with those. Honestly, I felt like I deserved some praise for not suggesting it.

「Wanna grab something to eat?」

I asked, adjusting my pace to match hers.

We hadn't made any plans beyond the movie, but there was something I needed to talk to her about. I didn't necessarily have to eat with her—I just wanted a place where we could sit down and talk. But if I said it like that, she'd probably just try to dodge it altogether.

「I'm going home.」

「Huh? Already?」

I glanced at Miyagi.

She didn't look like someone who was heading straight home after a movie.

If anything, she was dressed up a little. She wasn't wearing makeup, but her patterned skirt was cute, and her coat was one I'd never seen before.

It was a lot different from the casual outfit she wore back during summer break.

That's why I'd assumed she'd at least be willing to stop by somewhere after the movie. Maybe it was selfish to feel like this wasn't what we'd agreed on, but I didn't want to just let her leave like this.

「There's nowhere you want to go, right? Are you still good on time, Sendai-san?」

「Yeah, I am.」

「Then come over to my place.」

As she said that, she took my hand and started walking. Her grip was weak—unlike usual.

She wasn't pulling me along or being forceful. Her touch was soft.

But more than anything, she was holding my hand.

It was something I never would've imagined Miyagi doing.

Something she absolutely wouldn't do.

She did it so naturally, but it felt so unnatural to me that I couldn't help but stare at her face.

「What?」

She asked in her usual flat voice, right beside me.

The people we passed didn't pay us any mind—and that was normal. I never paid much attention to other people holding hands either.

So I didn't care what people thought of us.

What I did care about was what Miyagi was thinking.

「Why are you holding my hand?」

I asked, gently squeezing hers in return.

「What, do you want me to let go?」

「No, I don't mind. I just want to know why.」

「We're graduating soon, so who cares if someone sees us.」

She said something that didn't sound like her at all.

Graduation was just around the corner.

After I finish apartment hunting, it'd only be a few days until the ceremony.

Once we graduated, the rules we'd made—like only meeting after school or not talking at school—wouldn't matter anymore.

If I looked at it that way, maybe it wasn't such a big deal to

break them a little early.

Back in summer break, we picked this theater to avoid people we knew—even though Umina ended up spotting us—but what Miyagi had said now felt unlike her.

「That sounds like something I'd say. You wouldn't usually say things like that, Miyagi.」

「Then I'll just let go.」

「Huh? W–Wait.」

She moved to let go, but I held her hand tightly to stop her.

Usually, she'd pull away until she got free, but this time, she gave up quickly.

「You're fine with coming to my place, right?」

No.

But even if I said that, I knew Miyagi wouldn't listen today.

And honestly, it didn't really matter where we were, as long as we could talk.

So I just replied with, "Sure."

Miyagi didn't try to let go again.

We made small talk as we walked.

We passed through the ticket gates and rode the train together—just like we had in the summer.

After a few stops, we got off.

The February air was still cold, but we walked slowly side by side.

The shop windows we passed by were already shifting to spring, and the sky was bright today.

We were still holding hands.

But I couldn't bring myself to feel happy about it.

I kept thinking: If only we'd done this before winter started… maybe I'd feel different.

When we reached her apartment building, Miyagi let go.

She picked up her pace and walked slightly ahead.

Her skirt fluttered in front of me.

I could clearly see the legs I'd run my tongue over so many times before.

Come to think of it, it had been a while since she'd last ordered me to lick her feet.

In fact, I couldn't even remember when the last time was.

It wasn't like I wanted to do it, but I almost felt like things would be better if she went back to giving me orders like that.

We stepped into the building and took the elevator up to the sixth floor.

Together, we walked to the front door of her apartment, which Miyagi unlocked.

She opened the door, and we both stepped inside.

Miyagi was the first to take off her shoes.

I hurried to do the same and followed her, but as we reached her room, she suddenly snatched my bag.

「Sendai-san.」

Miyagi said as she casually dropped my bag in the middle of the hallway like it was nothing.

There wasn't anything fragile in there, but I still didn't appreciate her doing that.

I reached over to pick it up, but before I could, she grabbed my arm.

「What?」

When I looked up at her, Miyagi pulled me toward her.

Before I could say anything, she leaned in and kissed me.

We'd kissed plenty of times before.

But Miyagi almost never initiated them.

… Except during summer break.

After we had watched a movie together, Miyagi—deciding she couldn't be friends with me—had kissed me on her own.

It hadn't been that long ago, and the five-thousand-yen was still a part of our relationship, but I felt like things had changed a little since then.

Even now, I didn't mind being kissed by Miyagi.

Her lips were soft, and I liked how they felt.

But now that both summer and winter break had passed, Miyagi being the one to kiss me made me feel unsettled—like our roles had suddenly reversed.

I pulled her in closer, narrowing the distance between us.

But she quickly pulled away.

「Um, we're still in the hallway.」

She was acting so unlike herself, I didn't know what to say—so I ended up saying something a little awkward.

「No one's home today anyway.」

She muttered.

I'd never seen anyone else in this apartment besides Miyagi.

It was normal for no one else to be here, so I hadn't expected anyone even before she said that. I wasn't worried about that.

What worried me more was the fact that Miyagi was doing something she hadn't done much since the end of summer break—especially not in a place like this, outside her room.

Miyagi brushed her hand lightly against my cheek.

Her fingertips traced over my lips, and then she kissed me again.

As her soft lips touched mine, I found myself thinking again

that maybe the world was ending.

No, not the world—

It felt more like our relationship might be.

It didn't seem like Miyagi was kissing me because she wanted to.

I was always the one who wanted to kiss her, to touch her. Today, Miyagi was just doing what I wanted.

I pulled away.

「You still haven't given me today's order.」

I wanted Miyagi to go back to normal as soon as possible.

When she held my hand or kissed me first, it only made me feel like something was about to come to an end. And if that was true, I didn't want to be doing this with her.

「Just stay still and don't do anything.」

As expected, Miyagi didn't tell me to lick her feet.

Instead, she leaned in again and kissed me, like it was the most natural thing in the world—and somehow it just felt completely unnatural.

Her lips were just as soft and warm as always when I was the one kissing her. The warmth between us felt good.

If I could, I would've wanted to keep kissing her like this forever.

But something told me I shouldn't.

Miyagi had given me a five-thousand-yen bill as soon as we met today, so she had the right to give me orders. And the one she gave me this time was easy enough to follow.

But I didn't want to follow it.

I pushed her away by the shoulders.

「Um, hey. Don't you think you've been acting a little weird lately?」

I glanced at Miyagi as I picked up my bag from the floor.

「You're always the one trying to kiss me, aren't you?」

「Yeah, but…」

「You don't want to?」

「I do. I do, but… is this supposed to be a continuation of summer break?」

Miyagi was acting differently from how she had back then, yet she was doing the same kinds of things.

「A continuation?」

「You know, like, when we were pretending to be friends.」

Back then, when we watched a movie together, it had felt like we were testing whether or not we could become friends. Miyagi had decided we couldn't, and I had accepted it.

「No, I don't want to be friends with you, Sendai-san.」

It seemed that hadn't changed.

「Okay, then what's going on?」

I asked, but she didn't answer.

Miyagi fell silent, her gaze fixed on me like she was trying to observe me.

「Fine, you don't have to answer that. But I want you to answer my next question.」

I decided to bring up the thing I'd wanted to ask today. But before I could speak, Miyagi cut in like she was trying to beat me to it.

「I'm planning to go to the same university as Maika.」

Her cold voice gave me the answer I had wanted to ask—and the answer I'd hoped for.

「Okay, then—」

Before I could finish, Miyagi stole the words from my mouth.

To be blunt, she kissed me.

She grabbed my arm, and I dropped the bag I'd just picked up.

What are we going to do about our arrangement after graduation?

I couldn't get the words out. It felt like Miyagi had swallowed them.

Something soft and a little firm pressed against my lips. When she pushed it gently against them, I opened my mouth.

It was unlike her, but Miyagi slipped her tongue in.

The tip of her tongue touched mine, and her grip on my arm tightened.

When I moved my tongue against hers, her hand tightened again.

I used to think that a Miyagi who wasn't so cynical would be better. But that was just a thought.

This wasn't the Miyagi I wanted to keep seeing during our years at university.

I pushed her away from me.

「You don't have to force yourself to do this.」

I wanted the usual Miyagi.

There was no point in talking about our future if she wasn't being herself.

「I'm not forcing myself to do anything.」

She said, her hand brushing lightly against my neck.

Her fingers traced up until they found the chain of my pendant, then tugged it out.

「I've got something I want to tell you after the graduation ceremony, so make sure you come. And don't forget to bring this.」

She gave the chain a hard yank.

It hurt.

Both my arm from earlier and my neck where the chain had dug in ached.

「Go home for today.」

Miyagi said as she picked up the bag I had dropped.

「Here.」

She shoved it into my hands.

「Miyagi, when's the next time you're planning on calling me over?」

「After the graduation ceremony. I'm not calling you before that, so don't forget to come.」

She said, stressing the last part, before grabbing my arm and pulling me toward the door.

Then, she shoved me out.

The door slammed shut in my face.

Normally, she'd see me off downstairs, but today she didn't.

Nothing good ever happened when things were like this.

I couldn't help but let out a small sigh.

Chapter 37

After the Graduation Ceremony with Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 117

Just because it was the morning of the graduation ceremony didn't mean anything special was going to happen.

I knew that.

Even so, I found myself wondering—what if she was waiting for me outside?

The thought had crossed my mind, but of course, there was no way Sendai-san would be standing right outside my apartment. She'd randomly shown up at my place before, so I'd thought maybe, just maybe, she'd do it again today. But I'd been ignoring her messages lately, so I wouldn't be surprised if she didn't care about me anymore.

It wasn't like I was expecting anything, and honestly, it would've been a pain if she really had been waiting.

I walked along the same path I always did.

Once I got to school, I would only walk this path one last time—on the way home from the ceremony. Thinking about that made me feel a little sad.

The streets were warm for a March morning, and I made my way to school.

The weather was nice, but my legs felt heavy. My uniform felt heavy too, and naturally, I walked more slowly than usual.

But walking slowly wasn't going to cancel the ceremony, and it wasn't going to erase my promise with Sendai-san, either.

I entered the school feeling disconnected, and climbed the stairs.

As I headed down the hallway, I saw Sendai-san step out of the noisy classroom next to mine.

Because it was the day of the graduation ceremony, her blouse was buttoned all the way to the top, and her tie was neatly in place.

It was a sight I wouldn't get to see again after today, and although I didn't want to burn it into my memory, I couldn't take my eyes off her.

I couldn't call out to her right now, but I wanted to.

It doesn't matter if anyone sees us.

That was what I'd said to her when we went to the movies together, but in the end, promises were things that should be kept. If only both of us had followed the rules all the way to today—maybe then I wouldn't be feeling like this.

I tried to look away from Sendai-san.

But before I could, she noticed I was staring.

She opened her mouth, like she wanted to say something, but Ibaraki-san suddenly appeared and pulled her back into the classroom before I could hear anything.

I couldn't even sigh.

Even though I'd already made up my mind, just seeing her made me hesitate.

After all our exams ended, I'd been thinking about what to do after graduation. But the fact that I even had to think about it in the first place felt strange. I had already made my decision. I told Sendai-san I had.

And promises are supposed to be kept, not broken.

Even so, I still couldn't stop wavering.

I walked past the classroom where Sendai-san had disappeared and entered my own.

After putting my bag down at my desk, I went over to Maika's.

I wasn't fond of gloomy atmospheres, but Ami had already started crying even before the ceremony began, and Maika had been focusing on comforting her.

My legs still felt heavy, and my uniform felt stiff.

It made it hard to move.

But somehow, I managed to speak. I looked at Ami and asked, "Are you okay?"

「Shiori~!」

Ami, her nose red from crying, called out to me in a tone like the world was ending tomorrow and threw her arms around me.

「Man, I should've applied to the same university as you guys. Don't leave me behind~」

「Come on, you're overreacting. It's not like we're never going to see each other again.」

「But…」

Ami replied in her nasally voice, still sobbing.

I patted her shoulder and told her we could see each other anytime we wanted, and that we'd definitely hang out over summer break.

Even as I tried to comfort Ami, my mind was occupied with nothing but Sendai-san. I felt cold-hearted for not being able to

focus on Ami properly, but ever since the entrance exams ended, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about Sendai-san—and I hated that I couldn't do anything about it.

「Ami, if you don't stop crying soon, your face is going to get all messed up, you know?」

Maika said as she gently patted Ami's shoulder.

Ami, who'd been crying like a little kid, finally let go of me and wiped her eyes with a handkerchief.

「I know.」

I wasn't sure how long she'd been crying, but her eyes were definitely swollen. She looked awful—even though the graduation ceremony was just about to start.

「You too, Shiori.」

Maika said as she handed me a tissue.

「I'm not crying, though.」

「Not yet. But you look like you're about to.」

「Yeah, she really does.」

Ami added, still crying and laughing at the same time.

Their words stung a little.

I wasn't even crying.

I handed the tissue back to Maika and rubbed my eyes.

There wasn't anything today worth crying over.

Sure, I'd be going to a different university than Ami, but that didn't mean we'd never see each other again.

I'd still be with Maika too.

— The only person I wouldn't be seeing anymore was Sendai-san.

After today, everything between us would end.

We wouldn't see each other again.

That was why I wanted to make a few final memories with her before we graduated. I didn't want to carve reminders of Sendai-san into the calendar of my heart, but with the end drawing near, I thought it'd be okay to leave behind just a few.

Giving her chocolate on Valentine's Day.

Watching a movie together.

None of that was a big deal.

Even if something unusual had happened between us, I figured I'd forget about it soon enough.

Memories don't last forever.

They were bound to fade away eventually.

There were plenty of things I couldn't remember from just last year.

I didn't know how long it would take for my high school memories to disappear, but as long as I didn't think about them, it

probably wouldn't take that long.

But now, I was starting to regret thinking it'd be okay to leave behind just a few more memories.

The taste of the Valentine's chocolate.

The kiss we shared after coming back from the movies.

I'd replayed those moments in my head so many times, and instead of fading, they only seemed to grow stronger.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

What I thought would be passing memories had ended up weighing me down.

「Shiori.」

Maika's voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

「You're crying.」

She said as she reached out to my cheek with a tissue.

「… It's okay. I'll wipe it myself.」

I glanced at Maika as I wiped my cheeks with my hands.

There was no teasing in her eyes—just kindness.

I accepted the tissue I'd turned down earlier.

「Um, Maika… Thanks. Really.」

「The graduation ceremony's starting soon.」

Maika said gently.

「Yeah.」

Ami replied in a stuffy voice, nodding.

Sensing the atmosphere had gotten heavy, Maika suddenly clapped her hands together.

「Right! How about we go somewhere together over spring break?」

「Oh, that sounds good!」

Ami's cheerful voice chimed in.

As we discussed the date, time, and location of our trip, the teacher entered the classroom, and soon after, the graduation ceremony began.

The principal gave a speech first, followed by a guest speaker.

Their words weren't much different from last year's. I didn't feel particularly moved, and I wasn't on the verge of tears or anything. Still, the grand yet somewhat melancholic atmosphere of the ceremony made my eyes start to sting.

I rubbed at them as I looked around, trying to spot Sendai-san.

But with all the uniforms in the way, I couldn't see anything clearly, so I gave up and looked down instead.

If I had been in the same class as Sendai-san, would I feel any different right now?

If we had been classmates, would I have been able to trust her?

The same questions kept looping in my head, going nowhere.

— The me that Sendai-san wanted me to be.

In the middle of those endless thoughts, one of them—formed while we were making one of our last memories together—stuck, like it had been pinned in place.

I still didn't know what version of myself would've been the "right" one.

I thought maybe, if I could just become the person Sendai-san wanted me to be, I could change how things were going to end.

But I couldn't change who I was, and I couldn't become someone who could believe in her.

The more I thought about what was ahead of us, the more anxious I felt.

I lifted my head.

On stage, the former student council president was giving the farewell speech.

If that had been Sendai-san up there, I probably would've been able to see her clearly.

As if to chase the thought away, I gave a small shake of my head.

Not long after, we sang the school song, went back to our classroom, and got our diplomas from the teacher.

Then, I left the school with Maika and Ami.

We talked about silly things, not much different from usual, and then parted ways.

But not even five minutes later, I heard a voice calling from behind me.

「Miyagi.」

I knew it was Sendai-san's voice without even turning around.

I quickened my pace.

「Hey, Miyagi!」

Her voice was getting closer, but still, I didn't turn around.

「Shiori!」

I had no choice but to stop when she called my name louder than before.

I turned to face her.

「How many times do I have to tell you not to call me by my name?」

「You were ignoring me. What else was I supposed to do?」

Sendai-san said with a smile as she ran up beside me.

「I know I told you to come over after the ceremony, but I never said anything about going home together, did I?」

She was now walking next to me, the top button of her blouse undone, her tie slightly loosened—just like always.

「You didn't, but this is fine, isn't it?」

「It's not. We're not at school anymore, but we promised not to talk outside of it, remember?」

「Well, we just graduated, so the rules shouldn't matter anymore, right?」

How typical of her.

She was always like this—so casual, so carefree.

Even today, on the day of our graduation, she hadn't changed at all.

「It does matter. Just stay behind me.」

「Okay.」

She replied in a tone that didn't sound like she really understood what I meant. She stopped walking for a bit, but a second later, she picked up her pace again, walking right next to me.

「I told you to stay behind me.」

「I am behind you.」

I glanced at her. She clearly wasn't getting what I was trying to say.

「Look closer.」

I looked—just as she said, with a completely unapologetic voice—and sure enough, she was behind me. Just barely.

「That's not what I meant.」

「Come on, just let it go. It's not like we'll ever get to walk home in our uniforms again.」

There wouldn't be another chance for us to wear our uniforms or to walk home together like this again.

When I thought about it that way, I felt like maybe I could accept what she said, even if I didn't really want to.

「Sendai-san.」

I stopped and looked at her. She stopped too. Even after the graduation ceremony, she looked exactly the same as always.

「What is it?」

In another fifteen or twenty minutes—or maybe a little more—I already knew what I was going to say to her. I'm sure Sendai-san knew, too.

But she didn't look sad.

That made me feel irritated, seeing how unfazed she was, even now.

It's not like I wanted her to cry or look miserable. I just wished she seemed a little different.

「Did you cry during the ceremony, Sendai-san?」

「I didn't.」

She answered with a smile.

I knew why thinking about the future made me feel so anxious.

Even if we continued seeing each other like we did now, once we got to university, things wouldn't stay the same. I was going to a different university than Sendai-san, and we'd be living separate lives. Even if we kept meeting up, it would only be every so often, and whatever I learned about her would come from those few chances.

And no matter what I said or asked of her, she'd probably respond just like she was now—completely unfazed.

I wondered what kind of expression she'd make if I told her I couldn't forgive her for that.

That I couldn't forgive her if there was a version of Sendai-san I didn't know.

That was the one thing I took from the last memories we made, and I knew she wouldn't like me for feeling that way. I also knew it wasn't normal to think that way about someone.

「Did you cry, Miyagi?」

Sendai-san asked in a voice like nothing would be different tomorrow.

「Of course not.」

If I wanted the things I felt to actually happen, I'd have to lock her away somewhere. But that wasn't realistic. It was impossible.

So it was better to end things today, just like we said we would.

「I see.」

We walked home the same way we did after the movies.

Only this time, we weren't holding hands.

「Do you want to take any detours?」

Sendai-san pointed at a store across the street and asked with her usual expression.

「No. I'm going straight home.」

「Okay.」

I started walking faster.

Sendai-san kept walking beside me like it was the most natural thing in the world.

She was ignoring what I said about staying behind me.

Even though I wasn't in the best mood, I walked the rest of the way home without adjusting my pace.

After the Graduation Ceremony with Sendai-san (II)

Part 118

I took off my coat at the entrance.

I went into my room first and turned on the air conditioner. Following close behind, Sendai-san undid the second button of her blouse, though she didn't take off her blazer.

I stared at her loosened necktie.

She hadn't said a word in the elevator. She walked the hallway in silence too, and even now, she still wasn't speaking.

She seemed calm, like always—but small things about her felt off, and that made me uneasy.

Sendai-san sat down in her usual spot beside the bed.

「I'll bring us something to drink.」

As I walked past her, she grabbed my arm.

「You can do that later. More importantly, what did you want to talk about?」

She pulled on my arm firmly, and I had no choice but to sit next to her.

「Did you bring the necklace with you?」

「It's not that I brought it… I'm wearing it.」

Sendai-san tugged slightly at her collar.

Her loosened blouse revealed a glimpse of her cleavage—and the silver chain around her neck.

Normally, she'd complain when I answered a question with another question. But today, she didn't.

She listened obediently, even though I hadn't handed her a five-thousand-yen bill yet. Maybe it was because she already knew today was the last time.

「Now give it back.」

「Why?」

「Because the order's over.」

When I gave her that order, I told her to wear it at school and at home—but only until graduation.

She'd kept that promise this entire time, so I was sure she hadn't forgotten.

There was no reason to keep following an order that had already ended.

I was the one who gave her the necklace, so if it no longer served a purpose, I had the right to take it back.

「Just out of curiosity, what are you going to do with it if I do give it back?」

「I'm going to throw it away, and it'll be the end of our relationship.」

「What do you mean, "the end of our relationship"?」

She asked that like it was the first time she was hearing of this, even though she should've already known.

「I'm not going to see you anymore after this, Sendai-san.」

「Even though you got into the same university as Utsunomiya and we could meet up anytime?」

「We already agreed we wouldn't meet after graduation. We're not going to be meeting up whenever we want. So give it back.」

「But you're just going to throw it away, right? That's kind of a waste, isn't it?」

She really didn't know when to quit.

She should've known what I'd say today.

She should've known the order ended as soon as we graduated.

Sure, I never told her she had to return it—but there was no reason for her to resist.

You'd think she'd be glad to get rid of something that had basically been a collar.

「It's not a waste, so just give it back already.」

I held out my hand, urging her.

「You really are stingy, huh, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san let out an exaggerated sigh as she spoke.

Then, slowly, she began to remove the necklace.

「Here.」

She placed it on the table.

I reached for the silver accessory, but just before I could grab it, Sendai-san caught my hand.

「But before you do that… There's something I want to show you. Give me a second.」

「Something you want to show me?」

「Yeah.」

"Here it is," she said, pulling something from her bag and placing it next to the necklace.

「… What is this? A letter?」

What she put on the table was a cherry-blossom-colored envelope with nothing written on the front. It was thin and light, and I couldn't begin to guess what was inside.

「Have a look inside.」

I picked up the envelope—which, apparently, didn't contain a letter—and turned it over. As expected, nothing was written on the back, and it wasn't sealed.

It opened easily, and a folded sheet of paper slipped out.

It wasn't ordinary stationery.

It looked more like printer paper, folded into quarters.

I unfolded it—once, then twice—and found something written inside that I hadn't expected.

「Sendai-san… What is this supposed to be?」

It wasn't the first time I'd seen something like it.

In fact, I'd seen it many times before.

But it wasn't something I ever thought I'd be seeing right now.

「It's a floor plan.」

She said calmly.

「I can see that.」

「Alright, good.」

「What are you trying to say? Why are you showing me a floor plan?」

「Well, it's going to be your room, so obviously I had to show it to you.」

I had no idea what she was talking about.

She looked calm, but everything coming out of her mouth was nonsense.

I'd never fully understood her, but right now, she was the most confusing she'd ever been.

Because of that, I looked over the paper again.

There were two bedrooms.

There was also a kitchen, a dining area, and a bathroom. It was fairly spacious.

「This is a lot of space for one person to live in.」

There were plenty of things I could've said, but I decided to start with the most confusing part based on what I saw.

「It might be too much space for one person, but don't you think it's just right for two?」

「— And who's the second person supposed to be, exactly?」

I could already guess what Sendai-san was going to say next.

Still, I felt like I had to ask.

「You, of course. Don't live in the dorms. Come live with me instead. Oh, but the apartment's somewhere in between both of our schools, so there's a bit of a commute.」

She spoke quickly, not giving me a chance to cut in.

「Your room's going to be a bit smaller than it is now, but it's still really nice.」

「Sendai-san.」

「Oh, and they said we'll get the keys once we start moving. I'll give you yours later.」

「Sendai-san!」

「And I already told my parents I was planning to live with you. They didn't really care and told me I could do whatever I wanted.」

「Sendai-san! I never said I was going to live with you, and I didn't ask you to go looking for a room either. Besides, you usually have to pay something upfront when you sign a contract, right? Who even paid for my share?」

I had way too many questions and didn't even know where to start, but more than anything, I just wanted her to stop talking.

I looked down at the floor plan again.

I couldn't imagine she went apartment hunting on her own. She must've gone with her parents, and they probably signed the contract for her.

But there was no way her parents paid for my part.

「I paid for it out of my own piggy bank.」

Sendai-san said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

「Your piggy bank?」

「I saved every five-thousand-yen bill you ever gave me.」

「You stashed them all away? Wait, you weren't spending that money?」

I had never asked what she did with the money I gave her.

I never kept track of how much I gave, and I never questioned what she used it on.

It was her money, and she was free to spend it on whatever she wanted.

I just assumed she spent it on something.

「I never needed to. Anyway, I told my parents you gave me the money to cover your share.」

The five-thousand-yen bills I'd handed to her ended up being used on me instead.

I never would've guessed she was the kind of person who'd do something like that.

And the most ridiculous part was that it meant she'd been coming over to my place and following my orders for money she never even spent.

That wasn't normal.

「Sendai-san… For someone so smart, you're actually really stupid, huh?」

I folded the floor plan and placed it back on the table.

「I don't mind being stupid. So, what will you choose?」

「Choose between what?」

I already knew what she meant, but I asked anyway.

「I'm asking you to choose between the pendant and the floor plan. I'll go along with whichever you pick. If you choose the pendant, I won't try to see you again. Even if we pass each other somewhere, I won't call out to you. Today will be the last time we're ever together like this.」

「And if I pick the floor plan?」

「Then you'll come live with me.」

Sendai-san never made the decision herself.

She always gave me two options and pushed the choice onto me.

And whenever she did that, there was always an answer she wanted me to pick—regardless of how I felt.

There was only one right answer, and she always made sure I knew which one it was.

Today was no different.

Sendai-san wanted me to choose the floor plan.

But if I had to pick, it should be the necklace.

That would be better for both of us.

Sendai-san didn't need to be tied down by someone like me.

And I needed to forget about her and focus on a clean start.

Everything that happened between us could just be written off as a mistake—something I'd look back on someday and wonder why I ever let it happen.

It wasn't the kind of relationship I should be dragging with me into my university life.

「Can I ask you something?」

Before giving her an answer, I wanted to ask Sendai-san something first.

「Sure.」

「Why did you decide to do this?」

Sendai-san was acting strange, and she was making everything more complicated than it needed to be.

Today was supposed to be about saying goodbye. That was all.

「Why, you ask? I just felt like if I didn't do this, we'd never get to see each other again. And also… I did try to ask if you wanted to come with me, but you kind of ignored me.」

After the day we saw that movie together, she had reached out to me several times.

Some of those messages were probably from around the time she said she was going apartment hunting.

I ignored them, thinking she was just asking what I was up to,

or wanting me to call her—things like that.

But if I'd known she was trying to invite me to go apartment hunting with her, I would've definitely responded and shut it down.

「I thought I told you I was going to live in a dorm.」

I complained without acknowledging that I'd been the one ignoring her.

「You don't like living with other people, right?」

「… Even if I don't, I'll figure something out.」

A change in environment was a good excuse to move on.

If I was going to let go of Sendai-san, there was no better time than now.

「I think it'd be better for you to live with me instead of forcing yourself into a dorm. And if you are going to live with someone else, it might as well be me.」

There was nothing good about spending the next four years with Sendai-san.

She'd adjust to her new life quickly, and once university started, she'd just shove me off to the side—even if we were together.

But as long as we were apart, the traces of her left in my heart would fade on their own.

If I moved into the dorms and got used to life without her, I wouldn't be able to keep thinking about her forever.

Even if it didn't happen right away—even if it took time—it would be better for me in the long run.

That was definitely what I needed to do.

And yet…

I still couldn't help but ask.

「… What are you going to do if I don't choose the floor plan?」

I asked, staring at the cherry-blossom-colored envelope.

The spring-themed pink looked just like a real cherry blossom, and somehow, it reminded me of Sendai-san herself.

「I'll find someone else to live with me, so don't worry about me. There's probably going to be a lot of students looking for roommates anyway.」

Sendai-san spoke softly, like flower petals dancing in the wind.

Her gentle voice made my heart flutter.

The idea of Sendai-san living with someone I didn't know—in a place I didn't know—living a life with a person I didn't know… and I'd never be able to see her again.

There was a part of me that absolutely refused to accept that.

I grabbed the back of my left hand with my right and dug my

nails into my skin.

Who Sendai-san lived with was none of my business. It wasn't my place to say anything.

I knew that.

But still—I couldn't accept it.

No, I hated it.

I pressed harder into my hand.

What kind of expression was on Sendai-san's face right now?

I wanted to know, but I couldn't bring myself to look.

「You're treating this like it's nothing.」

I managed to say.

But I didn't tell her that I hated the idea of her living with someone who wasn't me.

「You're the one treating this like it's nothing. You're just planning to wing it once you start living in the dorm, right?」

I didn't really want to live in a dorm.

Living with other people felt impossible for me.

But that didn't mean I had a reason to live with Sendai-san, either.

We weren't friends. We were just former classmates. Nothing more.

「And if I choose the floor plan…」

What happens then?

I already knew the answer. I just couldn't make it sit right in my head. It made me feel like I had to ask again and again.

I took a quiet breath and let it out.

Then, I finally looked up from the envelope—something I hadn't been able to tear my eyes away from until now.

「Sendai-san, you really want to live with me? Even though we're not friends?」

「Oh, come on. There are plenty of people who live together even if they're not friends.」

Sendai-san said as she picked up the floor plan and slid it back into the envelope.

「And what about Maika? What am I supposed to tell her?」

「That's for you to decide later. So—what will it be? The envelope or the pendant?」

I could only choose one.

And no matter what I picked, Sendai-san would accept it.

What should I do? What should I pick? What am I supposed to do?

Which choice is the one I won't regret?

「Choose, Miyagi.」

Sendai-san said, nudging me to make a decision.

I picked up the necklace from the table.

She let out a quiet sigh.

「Turn around.」

I told her, and without a word, she turned her back to me. I undid the clasp and fastened the necklace around her neck.

The silver chain settled into place, disappearing beneath her hair.

It wasn't like I particularly wanted to be roommates with her or anything.

But for two people who weren't even friends, maybe becoming something else wouldn't be such a bad thing.

With her back still to me, I spoke.

「—— Four years. I'm okay with being your roommate… if it's just for the next four years.」

Just when I thought I was finally going to let her go, she went and brought me this envelope.

Seriously, what an idiot.

I gently tugged on a strand of her hair.

「Miyagi.」

As she started to turn toward me, I stopped her by placing a hand on her head and nudged her to face forward again.

「So, does that mean you're choosing the envelope?」

「If you'd rather I picked the necklace, I can still change my answer.」

I said, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible, and Sendai-san placed her hand over mine, which was still holding her head.

「Miyagi, if we're only going to be together for four years, then you'd better not flunk and have to repeat a year.」

「You really don't know how to pick your words, huh, Sendai-san?」

There had to be better things to say at a time like this. I wasn't sure what exactly—but telling me not to repeat a year definitely wasn't one of them.

「Now, can you take your hands away?」

She gave my hand one last gentle squeeze before letting go. I did the same, and once free, she turned to face me.

Then, like it was the most natural thing in the world, she held my hand again.

「Can I call you "Shiori" from now on?」

「No.」

「You're so stingy, Miyagi.」

「Shut up, Sendai-san.」

She laughed.

As always, she said the most unnecessary things.

But… four years, huh.

If it was just for that long, I didn't mind spending it with someone like her.

I gave a gentle squeeze back to the hand holding mine.

Volume 4 Extra

A Spring Full of Sendai-san

(Miyagi PoV)

Part 118-extra

Around this time last year, I would've been in the middle of spring break.

But this year, there was no such break for me, and now I was just drifting through these vague days.

I didn't know what to call this period between my high school graduation and my upcoming university entrance ceremony. I wasn't sure what to call myself either, now that I'd graduated but hadn't quite become a university student yet.

I let out a sigh and looked around my room, now filled with cardboard boxes on the floor.

This wasn't how I imagined things would turn out.

I had originally planned to attend a local university and commute from this apartment, but now I was leaving the prefecture to go to the same university as Maika.

Even then, I'd planned to live in a dorm. But that plan changed too, and now I was preparing to move out of this room.

Since I was going to a university outside the prefecture, I had no choice but to move a bunch of things, but I didn't think it would be this much.

Instead of a dorm, I was going to be living with Sendai-san, which meant I needed to bring more than I would've if I were moving into student housing.

My room was now filled with cardboard boxes. I was supposed to buy larger furniture after moving, but even then, I already had too much I wanted to bring.

Honestly, the whole thing was a pain, and if it were up to me, I wouldn't be packing at all.

My father suggested hiring movers to help, but I didn't want anyone touching my stuff, so I had to pack everything myself.

But no matter how much I packed, it felt endless.

Not that it was surprising or anything, considering I'd started packing before I even decided what to bring. And since I wasn't sure what I'd need in my new place, I couldn't help it.

「What should I do with these books?」

I stood up and walked over to the bookshelf.

It wasn't realistic to bring all of them with me.

I knew I'd probably end up buying new ones after I moved too, so I should only bring the books I absolutely wanted to take with me.

But even so, it was hard to choose.

There were so many I wanted to reread.

This room wasn't going anywhere, so anything I left behind would still be here when I came back. But the thought of not being able to read them until then made it hard to leave any behind.

「If only I could take everything with me…」

Even though they were just books, I felt guilty leaving them behind.

If I'd decided to stay here, I wouldn't have to choose what to take and what to leave. I wouldn't need to pack at all.

But that wasn't the future I chose.

So now I kept sorting, figuring out what to take with me and what to leave behind.

I stared at the spines of my books.

"I'll bring this one," I said, picking up the book on the far right of my shelf.

Then, I said the same thing as I grabbed the book next to it.

"I'll leave this one behind," I said about the next book over.

It was a depressing process.

As I kept going through my books like this, I couldn't help but feel like, someday, Sendai-san might decide to leave me behind too.

We were going to be living together for the next four years.

But there was always the chance we wouldn't even last that long.

I gave myself a soft slap on the cheek.

Just the thought alone made me anxious—even though we hadn't even started living together yet.

But still, there was something more important than worrying about the future right now: packing.

I took the first few books I'd picked out and placed them into a cardboard box.

Then I repeated the process—deciding what to bring and what to leave—and continued to fill up the box.

After a while, my hand paused over a particular manga.

「… Oh, this is the one I made Sendai-san read to me the first time she came over.」

It was pretty erotic and not something you'd normally read out loud.

When I'd ordered her to read it to me, she'd protested, but went along with it anyway.

That day had been the start of me buying her after-school time for five thousand yen.

I pulled the manga from the shelf.

I still hadn't decided if I'd bring it or not, but for now, I set it on top of the box that held the crocodile tissue case.

「Maybe I should take a little break for now.」

I hadn't made much progress at all.

Even though I didn't have time to waste, I just couldn't find the motivation to keep packing.

I sat down on the floor and spotted a photo album that had been left out.

It was filled with printed versions of the best photos of my childhood that had been taken with digital cameras and smartphones – carefully chosen and neatly organized.

Inside, there were photos of me as a baby, with my mother.

My first birthday—with my mother.

My second birthday—with my mother again.

I hadn't opened this album in a long time, but I still remembered what kind of photos were inside.

There were pictures from my first day of school, my graduation ceremonies, and my school entrance ceremonies. My mother had been in a lot of them, too.

But at some point, she stopped appearing in the photos.

Eventually, my father, who only showed up now and then, disappeared as well.

From then on, no more photos were taken, and no more pictures were printed.

And I stopped opening the album.

After hesitating for a while, I placed the album on top of a box.

It didn't make sense to pack something I likely wouldn't look at.

If I kept stopping like this, I'd never finish packing and things like this were only weighing me down even more.

「It's such a pain trying to decide what to bring.」

I also had one of Sendai-san's blouses in my room and still hadn't decided what else I wanted to bring with me.

But there were still a few days left before the move.

If I packed everything up now, I wouldn't have anything to wear tomorrow.

I slowly stood up, then flopped down on the bed.

This room full of cardboard boxes felt suffocating.

I just wanted to be done with it all already.

I let out a sigh and picked up the black cat plush sitting beside my pillow.

I gave its head a pat and spoke to it.

「… Do you want to come with me?」

The black cat plush didn't answer.

Sendai-san, who had given me this black cat plush as a Christmas present, would probably say something if she were here—but the plush stayed silent.

If only it could talk to me, even just a little, maybe it would lift my mood.

But no matter what I said to it, it never responded.

I put the plush back in its usual spot and closed my eyes.

I wasn't particularly tired, but as I drifted in the darkness behind my eyelids, I started to feel a bit sleepy.

My thoughts sank, then floated.

Then, I heard my phone ringing.

Once. Twice. Three times.

The ringtone went on and on, like it had no intention of stopping. It just kept ringing.

With no other choice, I opened my eyes, stood up, and picked up my phone from the table.

I answered the call.

「You're so annoying, Sendai-san.」

I muttered, seeing her name on the screen.

「That's kind of harsh. I was calling because I was worried about you.」

「I seriously doubt there's anything worth worrying about that justifies you calling me.」

I sat down on the bed and tapped my toes lightly against the floor.

「I was just worried you might not make it in time for the entrance ceremony.」

「What are you talking about?」

「Well, you know, I figured you might fall behind on packing and not get everything moved in time. Want me to come help?」

There wasn't much weight to Sendai-san's voice, but it wasn't lighthearted, either.

I didn't think she was that concerned, but she didn't sound like she was joking.

In any case, I let her know I didn't need help.

「There's really nothing to worry about. I already booked a moving company, and I am packing right now.」

「I see. Packing's a pain, huh? I thought for sure you'd say

something like, “Entrance ceremonies don’t matter anyway.” 」

She wasn’t wrong. Sendai-san could be oddly perceptive.

Packing was a pain, and I didn’t really like entrance ceremonies to begin with.

The entrance ceremony and graduation ceremony were the same—both connected the beginning and the end. That meant whatever starts must always come to an end, so I never really liked either of them.

Just thinking about the upcoming entrance ceremony made everything feel dull. It was like I was being covered in gloomy clouds, as if nothing but heavy rain awaited me.

「 Oh yeah, did you ever end up telling your friends that we were going to be sharing a place together? 」

Sendai-san’s question only made me feel more depressed.

「 That’s got nothing to do with you, Sendai-san. 」

I hadn’t figured out how to explain things to Maika and Ami yet, so I’d just been telling them I’d be living in the dorms. I wanted to keep pretending that, to avoid talking about the fact that I’d be living with someone else. But since Maika was going to the same university as me, I knew I couldn’t keep quiet about it forever.

If I told them I was sharing a place with someone, they’d definitely press me about who it was. That’s why I was still looking for some harmless excuse for how Sendai-san ended up as my roommate.

「 What about you, Sendai-san? Did you tell Ibaraki-san and the others about me? 」

I doubted I was the only one worrying about this.

There was no way she could explain how we ended up living together, considering we’d never even spoken once while we were at school.

「 What do you want me to do, Miyagi? 」

「 What do you mean by that? 」

「 I did tell them I was moving in with someone, but I made up a fake roommate. Everyone else is staying local anyway, so it’s not like I really have to explain anything. But, you know, if I told them it was you, they’d probably find that amusing and start asking to come over and hang out. So, if you want me to tell them the truth, I don’t mind. What do you think? 」

Her tone on the other end of the line sounded the same as always—casual, with no trace of concern.

「 … It’s fine. You don’t have to tell them. 」

She was being unfair.

I was the one who’d end up feeling troubled about Ibaraki-san visiting, not her. It felt unfair of her to ask me that when she already

knew what my answer would be.

「It's not like you told your friends either, right, Miyagi?」

「You're so annoying.」

Sendai-san really was unfair.

In the end, I was the only one stressing over this.

But for now, I could probably get away with not telling Maika and Ami about her. I could put it off just a little longer.

「Well, I can't help you with telling your friends about me, but I can at least help with the move. So if you ever need me, just let me know.」

「I'm good with just the thought.」

Packing felt like sorting through my memories.

It was a huge pain, but I didn't want anyone else touching them. I wanted to clean up this messy room on my own.

「Miyagi.」

Sendai-san said my name softly.

「What?」

「… I'll be waiting for you over there, then.」

Her voice was gentle through the phone.

「Yeah.」

There were so many things I was worried about.

Living with Sendai-san came with a lot of worries—ones I didn't even have to go looking for.

But this was something I chose for myself.

It might not all be good, but I knew there'd be fun times, too.

Even if I still felt anxious, I didn't regret choosing that envelope.

「See you later, then.」

Sendai-san said, and I answered with, "Yeah, see you."

With that, the call ended, and her voice disappeared.

I picked up the black cat plush sitting beside my pillow.

「How about you come with me?」

I stood up, the black cat plush in hand, and looked around the room filled with cardboard boxes.

Back on the day of my high school entrance ceremony, I never would've imagined a day like this would come.

At the time, I wasn't even sure if I'd even go to university. I thought I'd just spend the rest of my life in this empty home.

But then, in July of my second year, thanks to a mix of chance and whim, Sendai-san started coming over to my room.

Even in my third year, she continued to visit.

Then came the graduation ceremony—the end of our arrangement, the end of any reason for Sendai-san to come over.

Spring arrived in this room, and along with it, the last of my

five-thousand-yen bills handed over to her, and the last of my orders.

The time to part with this room—where Sendai-san had visited so many times—and the entrance ceremony were both approaching.

But my time with Sendai-san wasn't over yet.

In fact, a whole new life was about to begin.

This time, in a place where someone would always be there.

Volume 5 SS 1

A Crocodile's Blues

(Crocodile PoV)
Part 118-extra

Dark.

And on top of that, cramped.

What is this? Unbelievable.

Moving is the absolute worst.

As the distinguished first member of the esteemed Shiori-chan Fan Club and an excellent, wonderful tissue box cover in the form of a crocodile, finding myself trapped in a cardboard box is entirely due to this relocation.

Because of it, my belly is devoid of the tissue box, preventing me from performing my crucial duty of protecting and supplying tissues for Shiori-chan.

Moving is truly a terrible thing.

In the darkness of this cardboard box, all I can be is a crocodile without its tissue box.

It's not as if I hold any grudge against Shiori-chan moving.

My place is wherever Shiori-chan is, so I shall follow her wherever she goes. If I can be with Shiori-chan, it doesn't matter how long I'm confined in a cardboard box.

However, I despise the reason for the move.

Sendai Hazuki, who intends to take Shiori-chan away from me.

The reason I'm in this predicament is entirely her fault.

Absolutely infuriating.

If Sendai-san had not appeared, Shiori-chan would not have ended up going to some distant university I've never heard of, and she wouldn't have been involved in something as baffling as this "room-sharing" concept.

I intended to live peacefully in this room with Shiori-chan for as long as possible, but now everything has changed because of Sendai-san, forcing me into a cardboard box, which is just not amusing.

Additionally, the order of packing is problematic.

Why must my brilliant self be packed into a box before the black cat plush that Sendai-san brought along? Moreover, the packing wasn't even halfway done before I was placed in the box, and though temporarily, the lid was closed.

Even though I've been by Shiori-chan's side and been cherished by her long before Sendai-san brought that black cat, it now seems like the cat is being valued more.

Unacceptable.

I have the mission of watching over Shiori-chan until the very end of the moving preparations, but I cannot fulfill that mission if I'm packed away in a cardboard box.

While I do accept that my beloved Shiori-chan decided on the packing order and have come to terms with it, I cannot help but feel uneasy.

Perhaps, Shiori-chan treasures me so much, wanting to ensure that she wouldn’t forget me, that I was boxed before the black cat. But the fact that the black cat watches over Shiori l-chan longer than I do is intolerable.

If possible, I want to get out of here right now.

And I want to see Shiori-chan.

When she was putting me into the cardboard box, Shiori-chan seemed slightly anxious, and I am worried about her.

Though I am a mighty crocodile, I cannot speak, so I want to get out of this box quickly and cheer up Shiori-chan with my fluffy hands and body.

From the depths of my heart—or rather, from the stuffing within—I genuinely feel this way.

As a proud crocodile tissue cover.

Volume 5 SS 2

A Black Cat's Hope

(Black Cat PoV)
Part 118-extra

In Shiori-chan's room, there's a bookshelf crammed with books.

Guarding those books occasionally is my job, a plush black cat.

But right now, I'm off-duty. These days, I've been listening to Shiori-chan talk about something called "moving."

Apparently, all this trouble is because of Sendai-san.

The preparation for "moving" is a hassle, Shiori-chan would say.

Since Shiori-chan no longer has to go to a place called "high school," she's home all the time and tells me stories like these. It makes me happy and content every day.

However, I'm about to be confined in a lonely place.

When I asked the crocodile tissue box about "moving," I was told it's about going somewhere other than this room, and for that, I'd be sealed inside a "box."

I was chosen by Sendai-san to be placed in something called a "bag," and that's how I came to Shiori-chan's room. Meeting Shiori-chan here made me happy, but I don't like dark, cramped, and lonely places like the "bag."

So, I don't want to be trapped inside the "box."

I want to stay like this, on top of Shiori-chan's bed.

Even now, Shiori-chan is stroking my head, and it feels nice.

"The packing is almost done," Shiori-chan says, speaking to me and

cradling me close. Then, from among the numerous "boxes" in the room, she selects one and opens the lid.

"It's cramped, but hang in there for a while," she says, placing me inside the "box."

No. I want to stay with Shiori-chan for a while longer.

I answered like that, but the lid was closed, and I was trapped in a place that was dark, cramped, and lonely—not lonely at all.

"It's too tight! Just because you're a bit like my Shiori-chan doesn't mean you can stay next to me."

Unlike being alone in the "bag," the "box" was different. Though I couldn't see, I felt something fluffy and soft next to me.

"Hello!" I greet.

Even in the darkness, I know.

This tone of voice and soft body belongs to Crocodile-san.

"Hello. Why is the black cat here too? It's so stuffy," Crocodile-san responds.

"I don't know, but Shiori-chan said to stay here for a while—"

"Why here?!"

"I don't know, but that's what Shiori-chan said."

When I answer, Crocodile-san lets out a sigh.

"How's my Shiori-chan doing?"

"Yeah, she seemed lonely but determined to tackle 'moving'."

"I see. We don't need to talk anymore."

"I want to chat with Crocodile-san."

"...If you really want to talk with me, the senpai and excellent Crocodile, you should show proper respect."

"Respect?"

"I'm a brilliant senpai, so you should act like I'm something awesome."

"Yeah, Crocodile-san seems awesome."

This place is dark and cramped, but with Crocodile-san here, I don't mind. Still, I want to talk to Shiori-chan soon. And as Shiori-chan mentioned, once we "move," we'll meet Sendai-san.

So, I hope the "moving" finishes quickly, and I can get out of this "box."

Right, Crocodile-san?

Chapter 38

What Used to Be Natural for Me and Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 119

Spring came, and we'd finished moving in.

It was the beginning of my life with Miyagi, now free of the five-thousand-yen bills that had always passed between us.

Without that exchange hanging over us, every day felt natural and fresh.

Each morning, when I woke up, Miyagi was there. And when I said "good morning," she would reply with a "good morning" of her own.

It felt like I was finally living a proper, human life—more so than when I lived with my family, who had always heard me but never responded.

But that didn't mean living with Miyagi was without issues.

There were plenty of problems between us, and it didn't seem like she had much interest in helping me sort them out.

I pulled out a milk pan from under the sink. After a moment of hesitation, I filled it with just enough water to make tea for the both of us, then set it on the stove.

We didn't own an electric kettle or a teapot.

I had brought what I could with me, and bought whatever we didn't have… or so I thought.

Only after we started living here did I realize how many things we were still missing.

An electric kettle was one of those things, and I wanted to go out and get one.

But I couldn’t.

And it was all Miyagi’s fault.

I sighed.

Just then, I heard footsteps behind me and turned around.

Miyagi was standing there, looking half-asleep, so I greeted her.

"Good morning."

"… Good morning."

"Want some black tea?"

"No."

"What are you going to do about lunch?"

As usual, she was dressed in jeans and a hoodie.

She frowned at me like I was bothering her with questions she didn’t want to answer.

Even though I said “good morning,” it was already almost noon.

It was a Saturday, so sleeping in was fine. I wasn’t sure how far I could go when it came to interfering with Miyagi’s routine, but we lived together now, so I figured it was okay to at least ask what she was planning to eat.

"I’ll just eat whatever."

"Then how about we eat together? I’ll start cooking after I’ve had some tea."

I asked as I took two mugs out from the cupboard.

"I’ve got plans with Maika later."

She was going out with Utsunomiya again?

I didn't like that.

Ever since we moved in, it felt like Miyagi had been meeting up with Utsunomiya way more than necessary.

"So are you planning to eat here, then?"

"I'm kind of in a hurry."

She gave me a response that didn't actually answer anything.

Was she going to eat with Utsunomiya? Or did she mean she'd just grab whatever because she was in a rush? Or maybe something else entirely?

I couldn't tell what she meant just from her words.

But I knew that even if I tried to ask her directly, she wouldn't give me a straight answer.

"I see."

I replied vaguely as Miyagi disappeared into the bathroom.

It didn't seem like she was planning to eat here, so I quietly returned the mugs I'd just taken out back to the cupboard.

Things had been like this ever since we moved in together.

Miyagi hardly ever said anything.

It felt like we'd gone back to how things were in the past.

When I first started going over to her place, she hadn't talked much then either, and I was never good at dealing with the silence between us. That's how it felt now, too.

Neither of us had gotten used to this new life yet.

There was no longer a five-thousand-bill being exchanged between us, and now we were just roommates.

But I wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean for us.

A few weeks ago, being together felt normal. Now, it felt like we were too close—but if we weren't together, it felt like we were too far apart.

I poured the hot water out of the milk pan.

I knew living with Miyagi wouldn't be all fun and games, but I didn't think it'd be this difficult either.

I took out some eggs and milk, grabbed a bowl, and cracked the eggs into it. After adding some sugar and mixing it together, I poured in the milk.

Normally, I'd slice the loaf of bread with a knife, but today I just tore it into four slices by hand and tossed them into the bowl.

As I watched the bread soak in the egg mixture, Miyagi came out of the bathroom. But before I could say anything, she disappeared into her room.

It was a bit early for lunch, but I decided to make French toast.

I heated a frying pan and melted some butter in it.

The kitchen was small compared to the one at Miyagi's place, but it was clean and easy to use.

Still, I couldn't shake the discomfort.

It hadn't really sunk in that this apartment was now my new "home."

I placed the soaked bread into the pan and stared at it.

Miyagi was always here in the mornings, when we came home, and before we went to sleep. When I was in my room, I was alone, but she was always just on the other side of the wall.

It made me feel a little nervous.

Maybe Miyagi felt the same.

But either way, this was probably better than living in a dorm.

I sighed and turned off the stove.

I grabbed a plate from the cupboard, set the French toast on it, and opened the fridge.

I reached for the orange juice, then changed my mind and grabbed the soda instead.

After pouring it into a glass, I set it down beside my food.

I picked up my fork and sat down.

Then I heard a door open.

"I'm leaving now, Sendai-san."

I looked up from the French toast and turned to Miyagi.

"Will you have a spare moment when you come back?"

Honestly, I wanted to ask when she'd be back. But it felt like I was trying to monitor her 24/7 if I said that out loud.

"I'm not sure."

She answered curtly, and before I could say another word, she headed straight for the front door.

It felt like she was running away.

I took a sip of the soda Miyagi always drank.

It still didn't taste very good.

I didn't like the fizzy sensation in my mouth or the way it made my stomach feel bloated, so I couldn't understand why Miyagi enjoyed it so much. To me, soda wasn't even something I could confidently call sweet, and I wouldn't drink it by choice.

I slowly brought the French toast to my mouth.

It was something I could definitely call sweet, and I could also taste the rich flavor of butter and egg.

The soft, moist bread helped ease my stomach.

I finished about half and kept sipping the soda.

University had only just started, and I hadn't finished choosing all my classes yet.

I didn't know what I should take or what kind of schedule I wanted.

They were things I wanted to talk to Miyagi about, but she kept avoiding me.

She used to do that a lot before, too, but now that we lived together in such a small space, it hurt more.

The small table with two chairs, meant for both of us, felt like it belonged to me alone.

Miyagi almost never sat across from me.

And to think, just last summer, we were making and eating French toast together.

I sighed as I finished the rest.

I pulled out a tissue and wiped my mouth.

There wasn't a cover on the tissue box.

If Miyagi had wanted a cover, we could've gone to buy one together. I wanted to get an electric kettle too. There were probably other things we still needed.

If we could just shop together, maybe that'd make living together easier.

But right now, I didn't even know if she wanted a tissue box cover, or if she thought we needed a kettle, because we hadn't had a chance to talk about those things.

And because I'd never been in Miyagi's room before, I didn't even

know how the crocodile tissue box cover or the black cat plush were doing.

Even though we lived together, her room felt so far away.

I rested my head on the table and touched my neck.

The pendant I always wore wasn't there anymore—Miyagi said it wasn't necessary.

I wanted to open her door, sit next to her, and kiss her like we used to—

"I bet that'd just make her angry, though."

Now that the five-thousand-yen that'd always been exchanged between us was gone, we couldn't do those things anymore.

We hadn't kissed once since we went to the movies.

I wondered if Miyagi would ever want to kiss me again.

I'd always thought we'd be fine even without a five-thousand-yen bill between us.

But now, more than ever, I found myself wishing there was one.

This brand new life we were sharing together felt more difficult than I'd expected.

I wanted to talk to Miyagi.

No—we needed to talk.

If things stayed like this, we probably wouldn't be able to keep living together.

Sooner or later, things would fall apart.

I'd known from the start that living with Miyagi wouldn't be easy.

I was the one who forced her to choose this arrangement, so I felt responsible. That's why I had to do something to change the mood between us.

If I didn’t know how much distance we should keep, then all I had to do was find some kind of tool to measure it.

A ruler—something that could help us figure out a new kind of closeness.

Something that would let us be ourselves without getting in each other’s way.

The first time I went to Miyagi’s place, we’d managed to set some rules together.

If we could do that again, living together would be a lot easier.

I lifted my head and picked up my phone from the edge of the table.

I sent a message to Miyagi, wherever she was.

"I’ll be waiting for you before dinner.』

After a short pause, she replied.

"I don’t know when I’ll be back, though.』

"I’ll be waiting until you come back, no matter what.』

It came off sounding a bit like a threat, but there was no other way to put it.

"I’ll pick something up for us to eat before I come home, then.』

She didn’t say what time she’d be back, but if she was bringing food, she’d probably get home around the time I got hungry.

I replied, “I’ll be waiting, then,” and cleared my plate and cup from the table.

What Used to Be Natural for Me and Miyagi (II)

Part 120

"Isn't this a little too much?"

I said as I placed the large bag on the table and looked at Miyagi.

She'd come back a bit earlier than I expected.

But that was a good thing.

I'd been hoping she'd return as soon as possible, so I was honestly grateful.

Still, the bag Miyagi had handed me earlier was filled with way too much bread for just the two of us, so I couldn't help pointing it out.

"Maika said the bread from this shop was really good, so I bought a lot."

Hearing Utsunomiya's name made my brows twitch.

Miyagi had kept her promise to "get something for us to eat" before coming back, and I hadn't specified what that "something" should be. So technically, there was nothing wrong with her bringing back bread Utsunomiya had recommended.

But right now, I just didn't want to hear her name.

"People usually eat bread for breakfast, right? It's not really dinner food."

I blurted out something that made it sound like I was just picking a fight.

Miyagi, standing just a few steps away with an unfriendly expression, replied with,

"You don’t have to eat it if you don’t want to."

Her voice was low, and an awkward tension filled the small dining kitchen.

This wasn’t how I wanted the conversation to go.

It wasn’t the bread’s fault, or even Utsunomiya’s.

I was the one in a bad mood. And if things kept going like this, we wouldn’t get anywhere.

Calm down, I told myself.

"I’ll eat. I’m hungry, anyway. Hang on, I’ll get us something to drink. You want soda, right, Miyagi?"

Without waiting for a reply, I walked over to the fridge.

I took out the orange juice and soda and poured them into two glasses. Technically, we could just eat the bread straight from the packaging, but it wouldn’t feel like dinner that way, so I grabbed two plates from the cupboard.

I handed them over to Miyagi, then carried the glasses over to our seats and sat down.

Miyagi sat down on the other side of the table.

"You can pick whichever ones you want, Sendai-san."

“Well, in that case…” I said as I picked out a ham and cheese croissant and a croquette bun and placed them on my plate.

"What about you, Miyagi?"

I asked, glancing over at her.

She had been staring at me the entire time, but then reached out and grabbed a sandwich filled with potato salad and a sausage roll for herself.

"Let’s eat."

We said—not quite in unison, but our voices overlapped.

"Miyagi, did you end up telling Utsunomiya that we're living together?"

Instead of jumping straight into the real conversation I wanted to have, I asked something that had been bothering me.

"I did."

"What did she say about it?"

"Nothing."

Miyagi replied curtly, taking a bite from her potato salad sandwich.

"You didn't tell her about us, did you."

There was no way Utsunomiya—who had always been so curious about my relationship with Miyagi—would've had nothing to say about us moving in together.

"I did."

Miyagi said, still chewing her bread.

Her eyes stayed locked on her plate, like she didn't want to look at me at all.

No matter how I looked at it, I couldn't imagine she'd actually told Utsunomiya about me. But there was no point in asking Miyagi how she'd explained it. Even if I pressed her, I doubted she'd tell me the truth—and even if she did, it wouldn't really matter. All knowing the truth would do was satisfy a bit of curiosity.

"… Is that why you were waiting for me today? Just to ask me that?"

Miyagi asked without looking up.

I took a bite of my croissant sandwich and swallowed before opening my mouth.

"No, that's just something I wanted to ask first. I'll get to the point—

we need to set some rules between us."

Miyagi looked up at that.

"Some rules?"

"Yeah. If we're going to be living together, things'll be easier if we have rules to follow, right?"

"You can come up with the rules on your own and just tell me about them later."

Miyagi said, clearly annoyed, as she stood up, leaving her sausage roll untouched on her plate.

I'd kind of expected her to react like this.

Honestly, I hadn't even expected her to sit down and eat dinner with me tonight, so part of me almost wanted to praise her for that alone. But if she ran off now, we'd just keep going in circles like this.

"Are you sure about that? What if I made it a rule that we have to kiss every day? Wouldn't you have something to say about that?"

I asked, taking a sip of orange juice and setting the glass back down.

"Of course I'd complain about that."

"Then let's decide on some rules together."

"… What kind of rules are we talking about? Do you have any examples?"

Miyagi asked as she sat back down, looking at me.

"Stuff like who takes out the trash, who cleans, what we're doing about meals—things like that."

To be honest, I also wanted to ask if it was still okay to kiss her like before, if I could still touch her.

I wasn't satisfied with how everything I used to be allowed to do in Miyagi's room was suddenly off-limits now.

But this wasn't the time to bring that up.

Right now, we just needed to settle into a new, normal life together.

If we didn't set these basic rules for living together, it'd just be too suffocating to go on like this as roommates.

"In that case, I want to make a rule that we're not allowed to enter each other's rooms without permission."

Miyagi said quietly as she took a bite of her sausage roll.

"Well, it's not like we've been doing that anyway, but I guess it's better to make it a rule. Anything else?"

"Huh? Let me think…"

Miyagi muttered to herself.

While she was thinking, I suggested a few rules myself, and she added some too—though hers sounded more like personal opinions than actual rules.

Things like, it was okay to have friends over, but no one was allowed to stay over.

Or that we had to let each other know if we were staying over at someone else's place.

As we came up with rules—some necessary, some not—a decent amount of time passed, and Miyagi eventually spoke up in a tired voice.

"That's all the rules we need, right?"

I took a sip of my orange juice and looked over at Miyagi.

"How about we have dinner together at least once a week?"

I asked, trying to sound as casual as possible.

"You're okay with just once a week?"

"Yeah."

"Well, if it’s just that, then sure, but…"

Her words trailed off.

However, Miyagi looked like she still had more to say, so I asked, “But?”

"Not just when you’re staying somewhere else—tell me if you’re gonna be late, too… That way, maybe we could have dinner together on other days as well. We used to eat together a lot, didn’t we?"

She mumbled, speaking quickly.

"So it doesn’t have to be just once a week?"

"If you don’t want to, then forget it."

"No, let’s make it a rule. We can eat together on other days, too. So make sure you let me know when you’re coming home late as well, Miyagi."

"… Okay."

I hadn’t expected Miyagi to say she wanted to eat together more than once a week.

It was a small thing, but I was relieved she wanted some things to stay the same, even in our new life together.

"Alright. Then if either of us breaks a rule, we get a punishment."

I wasn’t expecting Miyagi to break any of the rules, but just in case, I wanted to set something up to make it harder for her to ignore them.

To be honest, I didn’t mind if she broke most of them.

But I definitely wanted us to eat together at least once a week.

It might have seemed like a trivial rule, but it was something I wanted to follow no matter what—and I hoped Miyagi felt the same way.

"What sort of punishment?"

"Hmm, let's see… Maybe the person breaking the rules has to listen to one thing the other person says?"

Technically, the punishment could've been anything, but if it was too easy, then it'd be meaningless. It needed to be at least somewhat troublesome.

"Fine, but don't forget. You're the one who's always breaking the rules, Sendai-san."

Miyagi said something rude as she stared straight at me.

Well, of course she has no faith in me.

Considering everything I'd done up until now, I could understand why she'd say that. But that didn't mean I could just come out and admit I'd broken the rules before.

"Don't worry, I won't break them."

I declared, finishing off the rest of my croissant sandwich. The ham and cheese blended together as it went down, and I reached for the croquette bun next.

"Hey, Sendai-san."

"What is it?"

I asked, taking a bite of my croquette bun.

"The meals we're going to eat together… who's going to make them?"

"Well, we're going to be eating together, so that means we're going to be making them together too."

I replied with what I thought was obvious, but Miyagi looked slightly annoyed.

"Oh, right. I also wanted to buy an electric kettle. Can you come with me to get one?"

I quickly changed the subject before she had the chance to change her mind about eating together.

"It's not like you need to ask me. Just go buy one yourself."

"I can't just do that. It's something we're both going to use."

"Fine. Buy whatever you want. I'll pay you for my half."

"You don't have to. Since it's something we'll be sharing, I'll just use that money."

Miyagi frowned at my words.

"That money belongs to you, Sendai-san."

"It's our money."

"I was the one who gave it to you."

By "that" money, I meant the cash that had been sitting in my piggy bank—so technically, she wasn't wrong.

I'd used some of that money when signing the lease for our apartment, though I hadn't used all of it. Before we moved in together, I got that portion reimbursed by Miyagi's family.

Well, that wasn't all that surprising now that I thought about it.

Once they heard she was going to be sharing a place with someone else, there was no way her family wasn't going to pay their share. Half of the contract-related costs had been properly refunded, and the money I'd spent was covered.

Even so, I didn't want to use that money on myself.

But if I tried to return it to Miyagi, she definitely wouldn't accept it.

So I decided I'd hold onto it and use it for our shared expenses instead.

Of course, Miyagi didn't seem too happy about that.

"Well, that's not the important part. I just want to go shopping with you."

I gave up on an argument that wasn't going anywhere and steered the conversation back to buying a kettle.

"What if I said no?"

"Then I'll just have you boil water for me in a milk pan for the rest of our days together."

I smiled as I said it, and Miyagi responded with a sour look.

"… When are we going shopping?"

"Tomorrow. Or do you already have plans with Utsunomiya?"

If I said "next week," it would feel like everything we decided today would just fall apart, so I didn't want to push the plans that far out.

"… I don't, so tomorrow's fine."

Miyagi mumbled as she finished her sausage roll.

"Hey, Miyagi. Can you wear a skirt tomorrow?"

The air still felt a little awkward, so I threw out something silly to lighten the mood.

"No."

"That was a pretty fast answer, don't you think?"

"There's no reason for me to wear a skirt, is there?"

"I just like seeing your legs, Miyagi."

Ever since we moved in together, I hadn't seen her wear a skirt once. I didn't wear them often either, and I wasn't wearing one today, but I still wanted to see her legs again.

Maybe it was because we'd spent so much time in her room in our uniforms that I'd grown used to seeing her in a skirt.

"I’m definitely not wearing one."

"I figured you’d say that."

"… Did you want to see my legs that badly?"

"Only if you’re willing to show them to me."

I couldn’t tell her—not right now, at least—but I really did want to touch her legs again. No, it didn’t have to be her legs. I just wanted to be able to touch her again, the way I could back in high school.

It was enough to make me feel almost sad that she didn’t order me around anymore.

"You really are a pervert, Sendai-san."

That was exactly what I expected her to say.

Still, it felt better hearing her say things like that.

Chapter 39

The Rules Sendai-san Must Follow (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 121

I had gone to sleep without setting an alarm last night.

Still, I somehow woke up a little after 6 AM, which was pretty early for a Sunday morning.

"… I'm so sleepy."

I pulled the black cat plush that had been lying next to my pillow into my futon and hugged it to my chest. I stroked its head as I closed my eyes.

At night, I could always fall asleep just fine.

But I never slept well, and I always ended up waking up way too early.

It'd been like this ever since I moved here, and my mind felt foggy.

It was all Sendai-san's fault…

Or at least, I wished I could say that—but I knew the problem was with me.

I couldn't get used to the feeling of having someone else in the apartment all the time.

Sendai-san was there whenever I woke up or came back from university, and even on our days off.

I'd gotten so used to no one being at home that now, in this new place—where someone was always there—it felt a little unsettling, almost like I was living in someone else's home.

Still, I felt like it helped me sleep better having familiar things I'd brought over from my old room around, so ever since we moved in, I often left the black cat plush next to my pillow.

I took a deep breath and opened my eyes.

A tissue box with a crocodile cover sat on the floor.

It was a small thing, but seeing something where it belonged made me feel a little more at home.

Hopefully, I could hurry up and get used to this new room.

I slowly got up and walked over to my closet.

I always hesitated about this part in the mornings.

I wasn't sure if I should walk out of the room in the sweats I was already wearing or if I needed to get changed first.

Before, I'd just wake up, eat breakfast, and brush my teeth still in sweats.

But now that Sendai-san was here, I felt reluctant to leave my room in pajamas.

Sendai-san was probably still sleeping.

What should I do?

After a little thought, I pulled out a T-shirt and jeans and got changed.

Before leaving the room, I picked up the black cat plush still lying on my bed.

We'd made it a rule not to enter each other's rooms without permission.

But Sendai-san had broken the rules before.

Just in case, I moved the plush to the bookshelf.

It wasn't really a big deal where it was—it was just a stuffed animal

—but I felt like if she found out I kept it next to my pillow, she'd say something about it. And I didn't like the idea of that.

The black cat plush had now been moved from its usual spot.

The crocodile tissue box was still on the floor.

I'd made my bed too.

After checking everything, I left the room.

Sendai-san was nowhere to be seen in the shared dining and kitchen space.

Even after I brushed my teeth and washed my face, she still wasn't there.

I opened the fridge and took out some orange juice.

I poured it into a glass and looked over at the table.

There was still a bag of leftover bread sitting on top.

I took a seat at the table and placed my cup beside the bag.

I didn't know what kind of bread Sendai-san liked, so I'd bought a bunch of different kinds, and it ended up being too much for the two of us to eat for dinner.

I didn't dislike bread or anything, but even I felt like I'd gone a bit overboard.

"Morning."

I heard a voice, and Sendai-san—who looked like she'd just gotten up—came into view.

"Good morning."

"I'm going to go wash my face first."

She said sleepily and disappeared into the bathroom.

I took a sip from my glass of orange juice.

Time felt like it was passing slowly.

Just like during lectures, every minute felt like it was dragging.

I probably wouldn't be able to sleep if I went back to bed, but there wasn't much else to do out here either.

As I sat there wondering whether to return to my room, I took another sip of my juice.

Staring at the glass, now less than half full, I heard Sendai-san's voice again.

"Are you okay with this for breakfast?"

I glanced over at Sendai-san, who had picked up the bag of bread. She wasn't looking at me, though. Instead, she was eyeing my cup.

"I'm fine with it."

"I see. By the way, you're up pretty early today, huh, Miyagi?"

"So are you, Sendai-san."

"I just happened to wake up now."

Sendai-san was wearing a large sweatshirt and jeans, which seemed to be her loungewear. After a big stretch, she sat down in a chair. Her eyes were so fixated on my cup that I had to ask:

"Do you want it?"

"Maybe just a sip."

"Here, take it."

Without waiting for a response, I passed the cup over to Sendai-san.

"Thanks."

She said, bringing the glass of orange juice I'd been drinking to her lips without looking at me. She took a sip and put it back on the table.

On mornings like this, it was hard to look Sendai-san in the eye.

Maybe it was just my imagination, or maybe she wasn't much of a morning person and was grumpy because of it—but either way, the air between us felt heavy. It made me uncomfortable, like I could feel it in my bones.

"You can have it all, Sendai-san."

"I don't want it."

"What are you going to do about the rest, then?"

"You take it, Miyagi."

It didn't feel quite like our usual conversations, but it still somehow kept going.

Maybe it was thanks to the rules we made yesterday.

It would still take time before I could fully adjust to life with Sendai-san in it, but it already felt a little better than before.

Still, it felt like the conversation had nowhere left to go. Before the silence could settle in, I brought up something to pass the time that didn't require us to talk.

"I'm going to have some breakfast. What about you, Sendai-san?"

I said. Sendai-san stood up.

"Yeah, I'll have something to eat too. I'm going to get my own orange juice. Did you want any more?"

"No, and don't bring any plates either."

"Why not?"

"It'll just be more dishes to wash."

"Well, I guess you're right, but still…"

She said, sounding a little dissatisfied. After a short while, Sendai-

san returned with a fresh glass of orange juice.

"You can pick whatever you want first, Sendai-san."

"What? I already picked first yesterday. It's your turn."

"I'm okay with whatever's left."

I pushed the bag of bread toward Sendai-san, who sat across from me. It slid smoothly across the table and stopped in front of her. She glanced at me, then pulled out a red bean paste and butter sandwich along with a walnut bread. After that, she handed the now lighter bag back to me.

"Let's eat."

Sendai-san said, taking a bite of her walnut bread. I followed her lead and grabbed a cream-filled bun.

Ever since my mother disappeared from my life, I'd spent most of my time alone. But lately, it felt like I spent more time with Sendai-san than with anyone else.

—— Even though I wasn't paying her five thousand yen anymore.

I knew we didn't need that five thousand yen between us now that we were living together.

As I took a bite of my cream bun, I glanced at Sendai-san.

Our relationship wasn't the same as before.

That much, at least, I understood.

She had arranged for us to become roommates, and I had accepted. But even with this new dynamic between us, I still didn't know why she had agreed to take my orders back then, especially for money she never even spent.

For me, those five-thousand-yen bills had been a way to keep Sendai-san close. I couldn't afford to lose them. For her, though, they should've been a simple reward for putting up with my orders. She should've spent them on things she wanted, not saved them up like that.

And now that I knew what she had been saving them for, I couldn't help but wonder if maybe, just maybe, I meant more to her than just money. Even though I knew that couldn't possibly be true, I couldn't stop myself from thinking it.

She wanted to do things like kiss me or touch me, so I started to wonder if that was all she really wanted from me. But it's not like I was anything special to begin with. If she'd wanted a partner, she wouldn't have had any trouble finding one, regardless of gender. Even back in high school, I'd heard plenty of rumors about people confessing to Sendai-san. She'd even confirmed some of them herself. There was no doubt she was popular.

Would she have spent time with me even without the five thousand yen between us?

Would she have still listened to my orders?

I'd never know now.

But even without that five-thousand-yen bill tying us together, Sendai-san was still here beside me.

And every time I wondered why, it made me incredibly uneasy. But I felt like if I asked her directly, it'd change something between us again.

We'd both chosen to continue this relationship instead of ending it—if something were to happen to it now, it'd be troublesome.

"Miyagi. If you don't like that one, wanna trade with me?"

Sendai-san asked, holding up her red bean paste and butter sandwich.

I took another bite of the cream bun I hadn't even eaten half of.

"I'm fine. I was just spacing out because I'm a little sleepy."

"Do you wanna go out for lunch today?"

She asked as she finished off her walnut bread.

"Sure. After I finish this, I'm going back to my room until we head out."

"Okay."

We chatted about nothing in particular as we finished our bread. We never really had much in common to begin with, and until now, I hadn't minded when our conversations died out. But since moving in together, the silence between us had started to feel heavier.

As I kept looking for ways to keep the conversation going, I finished off the last of my orange juice and bread.

"When did you want to leave?"

"I usually get hungry around noon, so maybe around eleven?"

"Alright, eleven it is."

I left it at that and returned to my room.

I tried to pass the time by lying on my bed and reading manga.

Even though I still wasn't completely comfortable here, I didn't feel like leaving my room either.

If I went out to the shared space, I'd feel even more out of place.

While I kept myself distracted, before I knew it, it was almost time to leave.

I opened my closet and looked at the spring-colored skirt hanging inside.

I pulled it out and stared at it. It was something I'd bought after we graduated but had never worn.

I laid it out on the bed, thinking it over.

If I put this skirt on and walked out wearing it, it'd seem like I was doing it because of what Sendai-san said yesterday. Even if the real reason was that I just happened to see it in my closet and felt like wearing it, it would definitely look like I'd done it for her.

I put the skirt back in the closet and pulled out a knit sweater instead.

I slipped it on over my T-shirt and left my room.

"Ready to go?"

Sendai-san, who seemed to have been waiting for me, asked.

"Yeah."

She had changed out of her sweatshirt into a blouse.

"Alright, let’s go then."

She didn’t mention anything about the fact that I wasn’t wearing a skirt.

I knew what she said yesterday had just been something she’d said on a whim. Those words had probably just slipped out without much thought, and she hadn’t actually wanted to see me in one anyway.

Sendai-san picked up her bag and started walking.

I followed behind her and left through the front door.

I'd heard about where we were going, but I didn't actually know the exact place.

The only areas I really knew were around our apartment and my university, so I had no choice but to follow right behind Sendai-san, just to make sure I wouldn't get lost.

After we turned down a bunch of streets, we finally got on the train. I stood there, staring out the window as the unfamiliar scenery passed by. It only made me feel like I didn't belong here at all. It reminded me how hard it was to adjust to these new surroundings, leaving me with a heavy, gloomy feeling.

But if I kept thinking about it, I'd probably want to get off the train before we even arrived. So, instead, I shifted my gaze toward Sendai-san.

"What is it?"

Sendai-san asked, sensing my gaze, though she didn't turn to look at me.

"Nothing."

"Tired already?"

"No."

I answered curtly, and that was the end of that.

She kept looking out the window.

Soon, the scenery that had been rushing by started to slow, and the doors opened with a loud noise.

The train, already filled with chatter, grew even noisier.

After the crowd of people leaving and boarding passed by and the doors shut again, Sendai-san spoke up in a quiet voice.

"Hey, Miyagi. Why'd you decide to have orange juice this morning?"

The train began to move again, picking up speed.

I followed her lead and looked back out the window.

"I just felt like it."

"Hmm. Then why've you been avoiding me so much?"

Just like how the scenery outside kept changing, our conversation shifted without warning and ended up somewhere completely different.

"Those two things don't have anything to do with each other."

I frowned at how naturally she'd changed the subject.

"Forget that. Just answer me."

Her voice was soft, as usual.

When I looked away from the window and back at her, I saw that—despite how calm her voice sounded—her expression was unusually serious. It made me feel like I couldn't just brush it off this time.

"… I just didn't know what else to do."

"I figured."

"I mean, you're always there at home, Sendai-san."

It wasn't something I should've said out loud. But I could tell this wasn't the kind of moment where I could just dodge the question, so I had no choice but to answer honestly.

"Of course I'm always there. We live together. It's not like I can do anything about it, even if you tell me you don't want me around."

"I never said I didn't want you around."

"Then you'll just have to get used to me. It hurts when you avoid me like that, you know."

"… I'm sorry."

I wasn't trying to avoid her on purpose. But I knew I was in the wrong, so I apologized.

Still, there were times when Sendai-san avoided me too.

I didn't think I was the only one to blame—but she wasn't nearly as obvious about it, which made it hard for me to complain.

"When you go out, you're always with Utsunomiya, right?"

She turned away from the window to look at me.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Where do you usually go?"

"I'm hanging out with Maika."

That was the reason I'd always give Sendai-san whenever I went out, but it wasn't easy to answer when she asked where I'd actually been.

"Just around the area, I guess."

"Where exactly?"

"I don't know. I always just leave it up to Maika."

"Even if you leave it to her, you're still going somewhere, right?"

"Yeah, but we never really go anywhere special."

That wasn't a lie. Maika and I didn't go anywhere noteworthy whenever we met up.

But to be honest, about half the times I told Sendai-san I was seeing Maika, I wasn't actually meeting her. Most of the time, I was just wandering alone—killing time in bookstores or cafes. I felt like if I gave too specific of an answer, she'd catch on right away.

"Well, whatever."

She didn't sound satisfied with my answer, but she didn't push it either. I felt relieved she let it go.

Still, seeing her all quiet now made me wonder what it was she really wanted to know.

Was it about Maika? About where I went? Or… was it just about me?

As I tried to guess what Sendai-san was really after, the train swayed slightly, and the passing scenery began to slow.

"We're getting off here."

Sendai-san's voice broke through my thoughts from behind.

We'd taken the train together, had lunch, and finally arrived at a store that sold home appliances.

All we'd planned to buy was an electric kettle, but somehow this whole trip had dragged on longer than expected. It wasn't like we needed to rush buying one, and honestly, we could've just ordered one online. There had to be someplace nearby where we could've bought it, too. It wasn't something we needed to hop on a train and have lunch over.

Her hair, which she sometimes braided and sometimes didn't since we started living together, was tied up today—braided on both sides and pinned back in a half-up style. She'd put on makeup, too, unlike how she looked earlier this morning.

Other than not wearing her school uniform anymore, she hadn't changed much from back when we were in high school. And yet, for some reason, she felt like a different person now.

Or maybe, it wasn't her that had changed—it was just how I saw her.

It was probably because of those five-thousand-yen bills she'd saved up.

I didn’t know what to make of it.

Everything about this new life—about how Sendai-san was acting now—felt uncomfortable, and it made me restless. Back then, I could ease my feelings just by handing her a five-thousand-yen bill, but with that gone now, I didn’t know where to put my emotions anymore.

If we could just go back to those days when we still had to wear school uniforms, maybe I wouldn’t have to think about things this much.

I wouldn’t have to stress about what to wear in the morning. I wouldn’t have to worry about awkward silences between us. She wouldn’t ask me to wear a skirt, and I wouldn’t have to think about how she hadn’t brought it up today.

We got off the escalator and moved to the next one.

Her back, straight in front of me, looked beautiful, her hair making me want to reach out and touch it.

Without thinking, I reached toward her and let out a breath.

Maybe I was just tired.

I hadn’t gotten much sleep, and my head was sluggish.

"Miyagi. This way."

Instead of taking another escalator up again, Sendai-san walked ahead. I followed her, and before long, we reached the electric kettles. She picked up a few, examining them as she mumbled, “Which one should we get?”

Some were wide, some were tall with narrow spouts. The shapes and colors varied, with extra features here and there, but honestly, as long as it could boil water, any of them would do. Still, she looked so serious as she compared them. I didn’t want to rush her, but I wished she’d just hurry up a bit.

"Which one do you think is good, Miyagi?"

She asked, glancing at me.

"Anything's fine. Did you not research any beforehand?"

"Well, I did find a couple that seemed good."

"Then just get one of those."

"I've narrowed it down to two, so help me choose between them."

She pointed to the two kettles.

"Either's fine. Just pick the one you like more, Sendai-san."

"We're both going to be using it, so at least help me choose the color."

She pointed at one of the kettles and said, "Let's go with this one. Now, pick a color."

"I don't really care about the color."

The color didn't matter for boiling water.

I didn't care if it was white, black, or red. Honestly, I'd rather she just pick it herself instead of dragging me into it.

"… Miyagi… Are you like this when you go shopping with Utsunomiya too?"

She let out a small sigh as she asked.

"Like what?"

"Being all cold and uncooperative like this."

Her words stung a little.

With Maika, I could actually be more thoughtful. If I were shopping with her instead, I'd probably ask what kind of features she wanted or even say which design or color I liked. Or rather, it wasn't just Maika—I would've been like that around anyone other than Sendai-san. But for some reason, I couldn't act naturally around Sendai-san. The only things I ever did with her were things I wouldn't do with anyone else.

"So, you're really not going to pick?"

She asked again. I looked at the kettles, sighed, then settled on something safe.

"White. It feels like a color that suits a kettle."

"Suits a kettle, huh? Don't you think that's a color that suits most appliances?"

"Then red."

"Got it. White it is, then."

She smiled brightly—far too brightly—and picked up the white kettle, carrying it to the register. I followed after her and we split the cost.

"We got everything we needed, right?"

I asked, and she answered with a simple, "Yeah."

I thought we'd finally be heading home, but then she suddenly said she wanted to look at something else and went up the escalator again.

"We're not going home yet?"

She didn't say where she was going, but from her pace, it was clear she had somewhere in mind.

"Just making a quick detour."

"Was there something else you wanted to buy?"

"Not really, but we've still got plenty of time, right?"

She grinned.

Her smile looked gentle, but her eyes weren't asking for my opinion at all. Rather than wasting my energy arguing, I just followed her quietly.

We'd eaten lunch, shopped together, and now we were wandering around aimlessly. Spending Sunday this way felt much better than avoiding her altogether.

I wasn't afraid of making more memories with her anymore.

But I still wasn't sure if this was the "right" distance for us as roommates.

"Over here, Miyagi."

She tugged on my arm lightly as we got off the escalator, and right in front of us was a pile of stuffed animals.

"You like these kinds of things, right?"

I wasn't sure how exactly she saw me.

I didn't collect stuffed animals, nor did I have that many in my room. Sure, there were other things here too—accessories, toys—but the way she assumed I'd like stuffed animals made me wonder what kind of person she thought I was.

… Though I didn't mind looking at them.

She seemed to be having fun too, and we had time to spare. I picked up a few, looked them over, and put them back.

Deeper in the shop were more soft things, and my eyes were drawn to one in particular—a simple, flat object.

It was a tissue box cover.

Now that I thought about it, the tissue box in our kitchen was just sitting out, uncovered.

I picked up a dark brown one.

"What's that supposed to be?"

Sendai-san peered over.

"A platypus."

"Doesn't it kind of look like a crocodile?"

"Not even close."

"Is it a mammal?"

"I think so."

If I remembered correctly, platypuses laid eggs, but they were still considered mammals.

"So, this is the kind of stuff you like, huh, Miyagi."

"It's not like I like it or anything."

"Well, either way, this thing's quite cute, isn't it?"

She said, stroking the platypus's head as she took it from me.

"I'll go pay for it, so hand it back for a bit."

I said, tugging lightly on its beak.

"Don't worry about it. I'll pay."

"Why?"

"It's for the tissue box in the kitchen, right? That means we'll both be using it, so I'll just pay for it with the money meant to cover our shared expenses."

Sendai-san said it like it was only natural as she fiddled with the platypus's little hands.

"I never said it was for the kitchen."

"Oh, it's not?"

"… Well, it is…"

"Then that settles it."

Without waiting for me to reply, she walked off to pay.

I ended up following her again, watching her buy it with the money meant for our shared expenses.

This was something I didn't like about her.

She was always trying to guess what I wanted.

And she never listened to me whenever I had something to say about it.

"Alright, let's head home."

She said, clearly signaling we were done for today, and started walking back the way we came.

The way back took just as long as the trip here. We didn't take any more detours, and we didn't chat along the way either.

But the silence didn't bother me that much.

We took the train back, then walked home together.

Once we were back, Sendai-san immediately opened the kettle and started making tea.

We sat facing each other at the table, and she handed me the bag with the tissue cover.

"Here."

"You put it on, Sendai-san."

I pushed the bag back to her. Without a word, she took out the platypus, then pointed at the tissue box next to me.

"Pass that over."

I handed it to her—but instead of taking the box, she grabbed my hand.

My heart jumped, and her grip tightened.

She held my hand so tightly, it was starting to hurt.

But she stayed quiet.

If this had been before, she probably would've kissed me by now, even if I said no. But today, she didn't.

Of course she didn't.

We were just roommates now. There was no rule saying we could kiss anymore. But then again, there wasn't a rule saying we couldn't, either.

"… Sorry."

She muttered, letting go of my hand.

I passed her the tissue box again, and she quietly put the cover over it.

We didn't have any rules about kissing—but even if we did, Sendai-san was the type to break them without hesitation if she felt like it. And yet, for some reason, she was holding herself back today, like she was bound by some invisible rule.

That was something else I didn't like about her.

"Done."

She said as she placed the platypus-covered tissue box down on the table.

The Rules Sendai-san Must Follow (III)

Part 123

On the table were plates of toast and scrambled eggs, along with glasses of orange juice.

Sendai-san was sitting across from me.

I still wasn't used to her being across from me, since whenever we studied together or had dinner together, she had always been sitting right beside me.

But in just one more week, it would mark a month since we started living together, and maybe by then, I'd finally get used to having her sit in front of me while we ate together.

As I spread butter and jam on my toast, I glanced over at my cup.

"Sendai-san, why orange juice?"

"Huh? Did you want soda or something?"

"No, I just thought you wanted to drink tea."

It didn't really matter what we were drinking.

I wasn't particularly picky anyway.

Sendai-san had been the one to prepare breakfast for us today, and it wasn't like I had any real complaints. Still, I felt a little annoyed that the electric kettle we went out of our way to buy yesterday wasn't being put to use.

"Oh, if you want black tea, I'll brew some for us starting tomorrow."

I looked at Sendai-san.

Our eyes met, and she didn't look away either.

I felt a little relieved by that.

I didn’t want to start the morning off in a bad mood.

"I don’t really care about the tea. I was just wondering about the electric kettle."

"Did you want me to use it?"

"If you weren’t going to use it, then why did we have to go buy one yesterday?"

"Even if I don’t use it right away, it’s still something we needed to buy eventually. Plus, wasn’t it fun going shopping yesterday?"

"That’s not the point."

I bit into my toast and took a sip of my orange juice. Sendai-san also took a bite from her own toast with butter and jam.

"Well, that aside, you’re going to your university after you finish eating, right, Miyagi?"

Not knowing whether she was actually planning to use the kettle tomorrow or not, she quickly changed the subject.

"Yeah, I am."

"Are you in a hurry?"

"Not really."

"I see."

The conversation stopped there, even though I didn’t know what Sendai-san was planning to do after she ate. I felt like if I asked too much about her, it’d seem like I was prying into her life, and before I knew it, both our plates and cups were empty.

"I’ll go wash the dishes."

I said as I cleared both plates and cups from the table.

"Don’t worry about it. I’ll do it."

"No, you prepared breakfast for us today."

"Oh, okay. I'll leave it to you, then."

Sendai-san said before heading back to her room. I quickly washed the dishes and returned to my own room. I wasn't exactly in a rush, but it took quite a while to get to my university from home, so I liked to leave with plenty of time to spare.

I got changed out of my clothes and looked at myself in the mirror.

At times like this, I couldn't help but wish we still had school uniforms.

It was such a hassle to think about what to wear every morning. I envied my past self, back when everything was solved just by putting on a uniform. I sighed and picked up my schoolbag. When I opened the door, I saw Sendai-san sitting in our shared space, putting the finishing touches on her makeup.

"I'm heading out now."

I called out to her as she sat in her chair. As I headed toward the entrance, Sendai-san stood up and grabbed my arm.

"Miyagi. Hold on."

"What is it?"

"Can I borrow you for a second?"

"Why?"

"I want to put some makeup on you."

Sendai-san said with a grin on her face.

She seemed to be in an unusually good mood, but what she was asking felt kind of pointless.

"I'm going to be late."

"Didn't you just say you weren't in much of a hurry?"

"I’m not, but that doesn’t mean I have time to spare either."

"At least let me apply something to your lips. They look chapped. You’ve got enough time to spare for that, right?"

Sendai-san said, her thumb brushing against my lips.

She gently pressed her fingertip against my lips, softly stroking them as if checking their texture.

I didn’t dislike the sensation of Sendai-san’s fingertips.

In fact, it felt nice to feel her finger on my lips again after so long.

"Come on, Miyagi. What do you say?"

She asked as she pulled her thumb away from my lips.

"I know my lips aren’t chapped."

When I looked in the mirror earlier, my lips didn’t look chapped at all.

"They kind of are. It won’t take long, so come take a seat."

Sendai-san said as she pulled me along by the arm, and I reflexively reached out toward her.

I pressed my thumb against Sendai-san’s lips, just like she’d done to me. I wiped her lips with my fingertip, and the lip makeup that had been on her smudged and got on my finger.

"Hey, Miyagi!"

Sendai-san exclaimed angrily, tightening her grip on my arm.

"I’m not going to have any time left after you finish fixing that."

"You’re such an idiot."

I shook off Sendai-san’s hand and turned my back to her.

"Will you have any time to spare tomorrow at least?"

She asked in a grumpy tone.

"No."

"Well, make some time for me, then. I promise I'll make you look cute."

"I don't need you to do that for me."

"Come on, it's fine, isn't it?"

"No. Just drop it already."

"A little makeup never hurt anybody, right? Don't be so stingy."

"Shut up, Sendai-san. I'm leaving now."

The platypus-covered tissue box was sitting on top of a storage box, but I didn't need it as I headed over to the bathroom sink. I set my belongings down in front of the mirror and turned on the water.

I glanced at my thumb.

It was stained the same color as Sendai-san's lips.

I looked into the mirror again, and just like how I saw it earlier, my lips weren't chapped.

As I thought, Sendai-san had been lying.

I touched my lips with my index finger.

My fingertip slid smoothly from corner to corner of my lips.

My lightly stained thumb nearly brushed against my lips as well, and the sensation of Sendai-san's soft lips came to mind. But I washed my hands without touching anything else.

I scrubbed my hands together.

After carefully washing off the stain, I left the apartment.

I took the train, and it took quite a bit of time before I arrived at my university.

I wished it was closer, but I didn't really have any other choice.

I passed through the school gates and entered the campus grounds.

I still didn't really feel like I belonged at my university, as if I were completely out of place here. I had people I could call out to and make small talk with when I saw them, but I didn't think we were close enough to be considered friends yet, and I still wasn't sure if those interactions were actually fun. And there were a lot of things that felt like hassles.

One of those things was course registration.

I had to decide which classes I wanted to take and design my schedule by myself.

It was a pain to have to make a schedule on my own and think about the credits I needed in order to graduate. If Sendai-san and I went to the same university, she'd probably be willing to do it all for me—but we went to different schools.

As I entered the lecture hall, I looked around.

It went without saying that Sendai-san wasn't here.

I took my seat and rested my head on the table. A moment later, I heard the sound of something being set down on the table, followed by a voice calling my name.

"Shiori."

When I looked up, I saw Maika.

"Did you not get enough sleep?"

Maika asked as she sat down next to me.

At first, it felt strange seeing Maika not in a school uniform, but now I was used to it.

The light makeup I'd never seen her wear back in high school had also now become part of her.

"No, I slept plenty. Also, sorry again about yesterday."

On Saturday, I had called Maika to apologize in advance.

But I felt like I had to apologize again today too.

I'd told Sendai-san I was free on Sunday, but the truth was, I'd already made plans with Maika. I felt guilty for canceling, since I'd made those plans before I agreed to go out with Sendai-san. I should've been prioritizing her instead.

"It's fine. So, what'd you guys end up buying yesterday?"

"I need to go shopping for appliances with the person I'm living with."

That was what I'd told Maika before I went shopping with Sendai-san.

"An electric kettle, since we didn't have anything to boil water with."

"You guys only bought one just now?"

"We've been a little all over the place lately, so we hadn't had a chance to go shopping until now."

"You're rooming with a relative, right?"

"Yeah."

I hadn't told Maika that Sendai-san was my roommate.

It wasn't like I never had the chance to tell her, but I didn't know how to explain Sendai-san's presence in my life, so I ended up telling her I was living with a relative.

I knew I'd have to tell her the truth someday, but if I told her I was rooming with Sendai-san, she'd definitely bombard me with questions about how we ended up living together.

And I still didn't know how I was supposed to answer that.

"Are they shy by any chance?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering, since you said you weren't allowed to have friends over."

If Maika ever came to visit, she'd end up finding out about Sendai-san. That would only cause trouble.

That was why I'd made it a rule that we couldn't bring friends over, and I'd vaguely told Maika about it, too. I felt bad for piling lies on top of lies, but I couldn't let her find out that I was living with Sendai-san—not right now.

"Hmm… No, I think she's actually pretty normal."

"Normal, huh… Oh well, it's fine."

She looked like she still wanted to say more, but she didn't press me further.

She was always so kind like that.

I'd been relying on Maika's kindness ever since high school, and even now, as university students, I was still leaning on her the same way.

"Oh, right. Since you weren't free yesterday anymore, I decided to get my ears pierced."

"You got your ears pierced?"

I glanced at her ears, and sure enough, she was wearing small silver earrings.

"Did you do it yourself?"

"Yep."

It wasn't like Maika had suddenly turned flashy or started hanging out with different people, but lately, she'd been looking more and more fashionable—especially with how she wore makeup now. She had changed since our high school days.

Everything around me had changed. Even Maika had changed.

I didn't really think Sendai-san had changed much, but maybe she had in ways I hadn't noticed yet.

The more I thought about it, the more it felt like I was the only one being left behind.

"Surprisingly, they look good on you."

I said, still staring at her earrings, and Maika gave me an exaggerated frown.

"What do you mean "surprisingly"?"

After I told her I was joking, we started talking about where she bought them. Before long, the door to the lecture hall opened, and the professor walked in with a slightly intimidating look and began the lecture.

Sendai-san seemed like the type who'd get her ears pierced after starting university, and Maika didn't seem like that type at all. Seeing the difference between them felt strange somehow.

It made me wonder if Sendai-san wanted to get her ears pierced too.

I had no idea what she thought about things like that.

I barely understood her back in high school, and now that we were in university, I felt like I understood her even less.

I didn't know anything about the university student version of Sendai-san.

Back then, whenever she talked about her friends, I could at least picture them. When she mentioned her teachers, I could picture them too. I could even picture the school itself.

But now, even if she mentioned her classes or her friends, I wouldn't be able to picture any of it.

I wondered what she was doing right now.

I could probably find out if I just sent her a message.

But even if I did, I wouldn't be able to imagine the scenery around her.

That thought left me strangely unsettled.

But what frustrated me even more was how annoyed I was over something so trivial.

How dull.

We were both sticking to the rules we'd agreed on, just like we were supposed to.

I looked at my thumb.

Then, I lightly brushed it over my lips.

Chapter 40

The Wall Between Me and Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 124

I reached my hand out toward Miyagi.

I ran my fingers through her black hair, combing through it gently.

My hand stroked her cheek, then traced the outline of her lips with my fingertips.

Miyagi didn't seem to mind—but she didn't react either.

She was always complaining about something, yet today, she stayed quiet.

When I leaned in close, she simply closed her eyes with a helpless look on her face. It almost felt like she was being unusually obedient right now.

I pressed my lips to hers and slipped my tongue inside her mouth.

She didn't push me away, nor did she bite back like she sometimes did. Her passiveness surprised me, but it also unsettled me—Miyagi wasn't putting up a fight at all.

Still, I felt like saying anything about it would just annoy her, so I kept quiet.

I kissed her lips over and over again, then moved to her neck. I left soft kisses there, careful not to leave any marks.

Miyagi let out a faint breath.

I loosened her necktie and removed it completely, then slowly unbuttoned her blouse, one button at a time.

As I kissed along her collarbone, Miyagi clung tightly to my shoulders.

But she didn’t say no, nor did she tell me to stop.

So I slipped her blouse off and gently pushed her down.

Of course, I already knew the truth.

I knew this was just a dream.

Summer vacation, winter break—

Moments from all those days, tangled together into one.

We were wearing our old school uniforms, the ones we didn’t need anymore.

And this wasn’t the first time I’d had this dream. I’d seen it again and again—even after we moved in together.

I need to wake up soon.

But even so, I wanted to stay inside this dream just a little longer.

I bit softly into her shoulder, sinking my teeth into her skin.

Her warmth seeped into me. Her body felt soft beneath my lips and hands—but I couldn’t tell exactly how soft, or how warm. My senses felt hazy, melting together.

"Miyagi."

I called her name.

But she didn’t answer.

Wanting to hear her voice, I slipped off the last piece of clothing covering her chest.

Still, she stayed silent.

No matter how much I touched her with my hands or lips, she wouldn’t speak.

All I could feel was the blurry yet distinct sensation of her skin against me.

Though I'd never really touched her like this before, I could tell that everywhere I touched felt soft. My dream conveniently filled in the gaps where my memories fell short.

I pulled off her skirt.

As expected, there was no protest.

I let my hands wander beneath her ribs, tracing her soft stomach, brushing over her hips.

My fingertips reached the waistband of her underwear.

I paused.

I knew this was only a dream.

Even so, I wasn't sure if I should really cross this line.

"Sendai-san."

Her voice called out to me, soft and pleading, urging me forward.

But the Miyagi I knew wasn't someone who acted like this. She wouldn't be so honest about what she wanted, and she definitely wouldn't call my name in that kind of voice.

Even so, I slowly slid my hand beneath the fabric.

And then—

And then——

And then———

My hand grabbed my phone, which wouldn't stop ringing.

"… Figures."

I sighed and silenced the alarm.

Setting the phone back down, I pressed my hand against the wall beside my bed.

Miyagi was just on the other side of this wall.

That wasn't good.

Right now, it felt like I was too close to her.

I knew, rationally, what was acceptable and what crossed the line—but I didn't have that same kind of control in my dreams.

Now that we were living together, I fully understood that I could never do the same things to Miyagi that I did in my dreams.

Still, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't at least a little interested in doing something like that to her.

And I felt like it was exactly because Miyagi was so close by that I kept having dreams like this.

"… I really am the worst, aren't I?"

It wasn't the kind of dream I should be having.

I'd bet even Miyagi had no idea that someone was dreaming about her like that, just on the other side of her bedroom wall.

And because I'd had a dream about something I absolutely shouldn't have, I couldn't help but want to curse myself.

I sat up for a moment, then laid right back down.

I didn't want to leave my room at all.

But I had to go to campus today.

I'd already finished registering for my courses, and now my schedule was set.

It finally felt like my university life was starting for real.

I couldn't let myself get used to skipping classes already.

After lying around for a while—long enough that it could almost be considered a nap—I finally worked up the motivation to get up.

I rolled out of bed and opened my drawers.

Pajamas felt too casual to wear out into our shared space. Maybe, after we'd lived together for longer, I'd get used to wearing them out.

But for now, I wanted to make sure I was dressed properly.

Suddenly, I remembered the time I stayed over at Miyagi's place.

Back then, I borrowed a set of sweats from her.

Maybe, instead of pajamas, I could just wear sweats like Miyagi always did.

That way, I wouldn't have to bother changing into a full outfit.

While I was still considering whether I should buy a set of sweats, I pulled out a blouse and a pair of flare pants from my drawers.

After getting dressed, I left my room and saw Miyagi making breakfast.

We'd agreed that whenever we shared a meal, we'd cook together, but we hadn't decided on who'd make breakfast. Usually, whoever woke up first would make it, and the other would do the dishes. Before I even realized it, that had somehow become an unspoken rule between us.

Miyagi wasn't exactly the best cook, but food always seemed to taste better when someone else made it.

"Morning."

I called out to Miyagi from behind her.

"Good morning."

Having someone return my "Good morning" while they were making breakfast for us made mornings not so bad.

—— If only I hadn't had that dream today.

Even though I didn't choose to have that dream, it still made me feel awkward.

I couldn't look Miyagi in the eye, and I had no idea what kind of expression I was supposed to wear around her.

Back before we moved in together, we'd been in different classes.

If I wanted to avoid seeing her, I could simply wait until after school, when my mood had recovered.

But things weren't like that anymore.

Miyagi was always just a few doors away now. It was nearly impossible now to avoid her from morning until after school.

"What are you making?"

I couldn't sort out my feelings properly, but the silence was making it even harder to calm down.

So I called out to Miyagi, who had been staring at the frying pan the whole time—but there was no reply.

"Miyagi?"

Even when I called her name, she still didn't respond, and I started worrying about how our breakfast was going to turn out.

Right now, I felt like I couldn't keep a composed expression at all.

I didn't really want to get too close to Miyagi, but I was curious about breakfast, so I walked over to check.

On the frying pan was something that looked halfway between a fried egg and scrambled eggs.

"Did the yolks break?"

"They just broke on their own."

Miyagi muttered as she turned to face me.

"Fried eggs and scrambled eggs are all the same once they're in your stomach, right? So it's fine."

"I mean, I guess…"

I could feel Miyagi's gaze on me, but I just couldn't bring myself to meet her eyes.

"I'm going to go wash my face."

I turned my back to her and headed toward the bathroom.

Behind me, I heard her reply with a simple, "Okay."

I took a deep breath in, then slowly exhaled, and then inhaled again.

Consciously focusing on something automatic like breathing helped calm me down a little.

Lately, my dreams had been filled more and more with things that hadn't happened in reality, and I didn't want to think about what might've happened next in them. But if I kept dwelling on them, I'd end up obsessing over it, so I pushed them to the back of my mind as best I could. I couldn't erase them completely, but at the very least, I needed to make sure they wouldn't get to me.

I gave my cheek a light slap and returned to the dining area.

"Breakfast is ready."

Miyagi said, and I looked over at the table.

There were several plates and two glasses of orange juice. The eggs looked like scrambled eggs now, with the yolks and whites completely mixed together. And not only that, there were slices of toast and well-cooked sausages, too.

I took a seat, and after hearing her say, "Let's eat," I followed suit and started eating the scrambled eggs.

This rule we'd set about eating together was being fulfilled in a way

I never would've expected. I'd originally suggested it just hoping we could share dinner sometimes—but here we were, even eating breakfast together.

"Have you bought any interesting new manga lately?"

Still unable to meet Miyagi's gaze, I picked a random topic and asked.

"Yeah, I have."

"Can you lend me something to read? I'm okay with anything that seems interesting."

"I can choose anything?"

"As long as it's interesting."

As I took a bite of my toast, spread with butter and jam, I glanced over at Miyagi's hands.

She poked her fork into a sausage and brought it to her mouth.

"I don't know what sorts of things you find interesting though, Sendai-san."

Hearing the slight dissatisfaction in her voice, I looked up at her.

Just for a moment, our eyes met, and I could feel my heart beat a little faster.

Right then, I realized—maybe I could use borrowing manga as an excuse to go into her room.

"Then how about you let me choose for myself?"

Today wasn't really the kind of day I wanted to get close to Miyagi.

But that didn't mean I wasn't interested in getting close to her at all. I wanted to know what her bedroom looked like, and I was curious about what kind of manga she owned.

"… I'll lend you something to read, but I'll be the one to pick it out and hand it to you."

Miyagi said, as she took a bite of her toast.

The Wall Between Me and Miyagi (II)

Part 125

I walked up the stairs to the third floor of the building.

Then I made my way down the hallway, and when I reached the front door of my apartment, I took out my keys.

After unlocking the door and stepping inside, I noticed it was dark inside. I turned on the light and looked down, seeing the spot where Miyagi usually left her shoes was empty. That's when I realized she hadn't come home yet.

Still, I tried calling out, "I'm home", but there was no response.

I couldn't help feeling a little disappointed.

I wanted someone to reply with a "welcome back" whenever I said "I'm home."

The dream I'd had this morning had already faded from my mind while I was at university.

Miyagi wasn't always the one who came home first, but now that I'd calmed down enough to look her in the eye and talk to her again, I found myself wishing she was already here.

"Well, not that there's much for us to talk about."

Miyagi hadn't said anything about being late today, so we were supposed to have dinner together tonight.

I walked deeper into the apartment, wondering what we should have for dinner. As I'd expected, there was no one around.

"I'm home."

This time, I muttered it toward the dining area, fully aware no one was here to hear it.

Then, just as I was about to go into my room, I noticed something piled on the table.

"Are those… books?"

I walked over for a closer look.

Sure enough, it was a stack of books—several volumes of the romance manga I'd been reading in Miyagi's room, along with a few shounen manga series even I'd heard of before.

This must be what she meant when she said she'd pick them out for me and give them to me.

Letting out a small sigh, I set my bag down on the chair Miyagi usually sat in.

Even though I knew she wasn't home, I still went over to her door and knocked.

I heard the sound of my own knocking echo, but there was no sign of anyone inside.

"Miyagi."

I called out to the door.

But of course, there was no reply.

I pressed my palm firmly against the door.

It felt like there was a whole other world on the other side—a world I wasn't allowed to enter right now, and one I had no idea when I'd be allowed into again.

I wanted to be on the other side of this door.

I wanted to see if the black cat plush I'd given her was still sitting on her bookshelf like before, and whether that tissue box with the crocodile cover was still there too.

I wanted to know what she kept in her room, to see what she'd left behind.

Right now, the only thing separating me from all that was just a slab of wood.

It wasn't like I couldn't open it if I wanted to.

If I broke the rules, I could find out everything I wanted to know right away.

As long as I didn't touch anything and came right back out, Miyagi wouldn't even know.

And if she didn't find out, it wouldn't really count as breaking the rules either.

Or maybe… it'd actually be better if she did find out.

Because the one who broke the rules had to listen to one thing the other person wanted them to do.

That was what we had agreed on. If I broke a rule, Miyagi would give me an order—just like before.

Well, technically it wouldn't be an "order," but it'd still be something close to it.

"… No, I can't think like that. I can't just go into someone else's room without permission."

Even putting the rules aside, going into someone's room without their permission was just too much.

And if Miyagi found out, she'd probably move out before I even got the chance to be punished.

I leaned my forehead against the door.

As I did, I heard a soft thump and felt the cool surface against my forehead.

Then, I brought my lips close to the door—but before I could say anything, I let out all the air from my lungs.

"What am I even doing?"

I'd been feeling off all day because of the dream I had this morning.

I felt disappointed she wasn't here to welcome me back home, but maybe it was actually for the best that Miyagi wasn't here right now.

If she was, things might've gone in a completely different direction.

"Miyagi, you idiot."

I muttered toward the door, then turned my back to it.

I picked up one of the romance manga volumes from the table and sat down in my chair.

I flipped through the pages, but I couldn't really remember the story from the earlier volumes.

I wanted the previous volumes to help me recall my hazy memory, but I couldn't get to them right now.

Even though they were sitting on a bookshelf just beyond this door, they felt so far away—and it irritated me a little.

I set the romance manga back down on the table and picked up one of the shounen manga instead, starting from the first volume.

I opened it and read through a few pages.

It was easier to enjoy than trying to piece together a story I barely remembered, but the memory of when I could freely read whatever I wanted kept flashing through my mind, making it hard to focus on what was in front of me.

Still, I managed to get through two volumes, and I picked up the third.

I was halfway through when I suddenly heard a voice say, "I'm home", and I looked up.

"Welcome back."

"You know you could just read those in your own room, right?"

Miyagi said, glancing at what I was reading.

"I thought maybe you'd want to hear me say 'welcome back' in person."

"That still doesn't mean you couldn't have just read those in your room, though."

"Yeah, but this seemed easier."

Miyagi didn't say anything back. Looking a little annoyed, she walked over to the fridge, grabbed a bottle of soda, and poured herself a glass.

She took a sip before setting it down on the table, then looked at me.

Our eyes met.

Just like this morning, I didn't try to escape her gaze, and I looked right back at her.

"Is it interesting?"

Miyagi asked, not mentioning the manga directly, but there wasn't anything else she could've been talking about besides the book in my hands.

"It's not bad."

"Let me know when you're done, so I can put them away."

Miyagi turned to head back to her room, but before she could, I picked up the romance manga I'd barely touched.

"Wait, do you have the first volume of this?"

"I do. Why?"

"Lend it to me. I forgot what happened in the earlier chapters."

I wasn't all that interested in reading a story I could barely remember, and I wouldn't have minded just leaving it that way. It was the kind of thing where, if I were to read it again, starting from

the volume before this one would've been enough to jog my memory. I didn't think it was worth the trouble to go all the way back to volume one—but it worked as a good excuse for what I really wanted.

"I'll bring it out for you. Just wait here."

"I can get it myself. Let me come with you."

I said, standing up right beside her.

"Huh?"

"Let me into your room."

"… No."

Miyagi refused after a short pause.

"Why not?"

"Because you'd definitely do something weird, Sendai-san."

Her words instantly reminded me of the dream I'd had that morning.

I could pretty much imagine what she meant by "something weird."

But honestly, the dream I had was probably way worse than anything she was thinking of.

The thought made my chest tighten a little.

Still, that wasn't the reason I wanted to go into her room.

I just wanted to see what her room—somewhere I used to be able to come and go from freely before we moved here—looked like now.

There wasn't anything I needed to feel guilty about… or at least, probably not.

Some ambiguous feelings stirred inside me, but there wasn't any need to say them out loud, so I simply denied what Miyagi had said.

"I won't. Seriously, what kind of person do you think I am?"

"… You're my roommate."

Even though what I'd said was wrong and dishonest, Miyagi answered honestly.

It was just like Miyagi said. We were roommates, and if we wanted to keep living together peacefully for the next four years, we couldn't be anything but that.

But after just a few weeks of living with her, I was already starting to wonder if asking Miyagi to be my roommate had really been the right choice. I was beginning to question everything about this arrangement—how, just by being roommates, I wasn't even allowed to touch her.

"What is it?"

Noticing I'd gone quiet, Miyagi gave me a confused look and asked.

On the day of our graduation ceremony, I'd pushed Miyagi to move here and be my roommate—changing the relationship we'd had up until then. Back then, I honestly thought it was the only choice I had, and the best one too.

"It's nothing. I was just thinking how weird it feels, being roommates now."

I said with a small smile, as if trying to convince myself of what I was saying too.

Miyagi frowned.

"You're the one who wanted us to be roommates, Sendai-san. You better take responsibility and act like one."

"Yeah, yeah."

"I'll bring the book to you, so wait here."

"No, it's fine."

"Huh?"

"Forget the book for now. Let’s start making dinner."

I said, walking over to the fridge instead of following her to her room.

"Isn’t it kinda early for dinner?"

"Well, I’m hungry."

I replied casually, making up an excuse. Then, after glancing at what was in the fridge, I asked Miyagi what she wanted for dinner.

The Wall Between Me and Miyagi (III)

Part 126

I couldn't decide what to do during Golden Week.

I hadn't heard anything from my family.

Well, I'd expected that much, so it didn't really bother me. If anything, I would've felt more uncomfortable if they had asked me to come home. And honestly, it didn't even make me sad anymore, knowing my parents didn't want me back either. It was convenient for me, considering I'd never intended to go back in the first place. But that also meant I now had way too much free time on my hands.

I wanted to spend some of that free time with Miyagi.

It had been a few days since I had that strange dream, but I still hadn't gotten around to asking Miyagi about her plans for the break. At the very least, I knew she wasn't going home either.

The problem was, I didn't know anything beyond that.

It wasn't like I found it hard to ask Miyagi if she wanted to hang out, but I doubted she'd just say yes that easily.

I let out a sigh.

Then, I shifted my attention to the teacher standing at the podium.

The slides kept flipping by, one after another.

As I listened to the teacher's voice echo through the lecture hall, I remembered the fried eggs I'd eaten earlier in the morning.

The egg Miyagi had made was cooked perfectly this time, and the yolk hadn't broken on its own either.

Maybe that's why she'd been in a better mood than usual—but thanks to one dumb comment from me, I'd ruined it.

I really shouldn't have said anything about her hairstyle.

They say it was best to let sleeping dogs lie, but apparently, I didn't always make the best choices in life.

Lately, I'd been wanting to get even closer to Miyagi—who I wasn't allowed to touch anymore—and sometimes, I'd end up making unnecessary comments that upset her instead.

Because of that, I'd left the apartment this morning without asking about her Golden Week plans, which was something I'd been meaning to bring up.

I couldn't even find a part-time job, either. It felt like nothing was going my way.

I let out another sigh as I kept my eyes on the slides.

I needed to get serious now that I was in university.

I shouldn't be putting so much focus on my social life.

I didn't need perfect grades, but I wanted to graduate in four years and land a decent job afterward.

Now wasn't the time to be thinking about Miyagi.

The teacher barely ever wrote anything on the board. If I didn't pay attention, I wouldn't be able to follow the lecture at all.

I told myself to stop thinking about Golden Week and focus on class instead.

Then, I tried to concentrate on the teacher's voice.

Unlike high school, these lectures lasted ninety minutes, and they felt painfully long.

I scribbled notes with my pencil as fast as I could.

Thirty, then forty minutes passed, and before I knew it, the lecture finally ended, just a little short of the ninety-minute mark.

"Hazuki."

As I closed my notebook, I heard my name being called. I looked up and saw Mio—one of the friends I'd made at university—glancing back at me from the seat in front of me.

"I've got some good news for you."

I didn't want the same kind of friendships I'd had in high school, so I hadn't planned on expanding my social circle here.

Still, I'd ended up making a couple of friends anyway—people I could chat with about random things whenever I was bored.

"You do?"

"Yep, so wipe that bored look off your face and listen to this with a smile."

"Whether I smile or not depends on what it is."

I said that, but it felt like Mio was smiling for me instead.

"You said you were looking for a part-time job, right, Hazuki? So I figured I'd introduce you to something."

She spoke in her usual cheerful tone.

It was true. I'd told Mio I was job hunting.

Technically, I could get by without one, since my parents were covering my living expenses.

But I wanted my own money.

I didn't plan to move back home after graduation.

I wanted to find a decent job and live here. But things might not go the way I wanted, and I could end up needing to find a new apartment.

With so many uncertainties ahead, I figured it was smarter to save up while I still had my parents' financial support.

"What kind of job is it?"

"Private tutoring."

Mio and I walked out of the lecture hall together as I asked her that. She still had that bright smile on her face.

"Wait, you're a private tutor, Mio?"

"Do I look like one?"

"No, not really."

Mio was smart and friendly, but she didn't seem like the type to think too deeply about things.

Optimistically, she was decisive.

Pessimistically, she could be careless and impulsive.

I could see her being a fun tutor, but I wasn't sure her students' grades would actually improve.

"Wow, you answered that fast. Well, anyway, if you're interested, I can introduce you."

"To the student?"

"What? No, of course not. I meant my upperclassman. They're looking for people interested in tutoring."

Her words brought back memories of tutoring Miyagi.

It wasn't just thanks to me, but Miyagi's grades probably had improved from those study sessions.

I didn't think that alone meant I was cut out for tutoring, but I definitely enjoyed teaching her.

"Can I ask them a few questions first?"

"Sure, no problem."

Mio replied casually as we walked down the hall, though I wasn't sure if it really was "no problem" or not.

"Alright then. Introduce me to your upperclassman."

I wasn't sure yet if I'd take the job.

But I was at least a little curious.

I had no idea what kind of person this upperclassman was, but I figured I could at least scope things out.

"Okay, I'll let them know."

Mio said in a cheerful voice, pulling out her phone. After exchanging a few quick messages with her upperclassman, she looked back up at me.

"They're busy right now, but they said they'd like to talk to you directly as soon as they have time. Want their contact info?"

"Sure."

I handed her my phone, and Mio entered their contact information. Then she added, "They'll probably call you in about three hours."

Mio went on talking about her upperclassman—how she was a third-year student, and shared all sorts of personal details about her. But even after my afternoon lectures ended, I never heard from her upperclassman. Even after I got on the train and went back to my apartment, there was still no message or call.

I took out my key and opened the door.

The lights were on, and I saw Miyagi's shoes by the entrance.

It looked like she'd come home earlier than me today.

I took off my shoes and went inside. I figured she'd be holed up in her room, but instead, she was standing in front of the fridge.

"I'm home."

I called out to her from behind.

"Welcome back."

Miyagi had apparently gone shopping, judging by the grocery bag by her side.

"So, what are we making today, Sendai-san?"

"Is there anything you want to eat?"

"Doria."

She said as she stuffed the rest of the ingredients into the fridge and stood up.

"I've never made that before. Are you sure there's nothing else you want?"

"You're the one who asked me what I wanted to eat, though."

"I just asked what you wanted to eat. I never said we were actually making that. Besides, did you even buy the right ingredients for doria?"

"I didn't know what we needed for it, so no."

"How are we supposed to make it then?"

I looked up the recipe on my phone as I checked the fridge, but we clearly didn't have the ingredients.

"Well, if you want it that badly, do you want to just go out for dinner?"

I suggested something more realistic.

"No, forget it for today. I already bought a bunch of stuff, so let's just make something with that."

Her voice was as cold as expected.

I thought it'd be nice if we could go out to eat together once in a while, but it didn't seem like Miyagi wanted to.

"Wanna go out tomorrow, then?"

I knew she wouldn’t say yes, but I decided to ask anyway.

"… Sure."

I found myself staring at Miyagi, surprised by her unexpected answer.

“Where do you want to go?”

“What time do you want to go?”

As I tried to figure out what to ask first, my phone started ringing.

"Oh, hang on for a second."

I took out my phone from my bag, which was still ringing.

When I glanced at the screen, I saw the name of the upperclassman Mio had told me about.

It seemed she hadn’t forgotten about me after all.

When I answered, a calm voice on the other end briefly explained the details of the job.

After about five minutes, the call ended, and I apologized to Miyagi.

"Sorry. I don’t think I can do tomorrow anymore. Something came up. Can we go the day after instead?"

"What came up?"

Miyagi asked in a low voice.

"I need to meet up with someone who said they can help me get a part-time job."

"—— You’re going to get a part-time job, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi, now seemingly more interested in my business than the doria, asked as she stared at me intently.

"Yeah. I figured I should start earning and saving up some money."

It wasn't like I was hiding it from her or anything—I just hadn't had the chance to bring it up yet. Miyagi was the type to either be in a bad mood or avoid me right when I was about to bring up something important.

"I gave you money back in high school, didn't I?"

Miyagi's voice grew even lower.

"I already told you—that money isn't just mine to use."

"Even if it's not, you're allowed to spend it however you want."

Miyagi said as she kicked my leg.

It didn't hurt, but I glared at her exaggeratedly, as if it did.

Miyagi had been pretty calm lately and hadn't done anything like kicking or biting me in a while, so this felt just like how things used to be between us.

Still, I knew what she'd done just now wasn't actually a good thing.

I moved away from her and sat down in my usual spot.

"Are you going to break your promise, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi said in a dissatisfied voice, still standing in front of the fridge.

"Sorry."

I apologized, putting my hands together.

It wasn't like the doria was going anywhere, but if I missed tomorrow's meeting, I didn't know when I'd get another chance to meet with such a busy upperclassman.

Finding a part-time job was something I'd been wanting to do since starting university, so I wanted to put off the doria until the day after tomorrow instead.

But Miyagi stayed quiet, neither agreeing nor moving from her spot.

"Does it really have to be tomorrow?"

I found myself starting to wonder if I should be prioritizing eating doria with Miyagi over meeting with the upperclassman.

As I thought about it, I glanced at Miyagi.

"… The day after tomorrow is fine, but you'll need to accept a punishment."

"Huh?"

"You get punished if you break a promise, right?"

Miyagi said, as if it were the most obvious thing, leaving me dumbfounded.

"Wait, hold on. We agreed punishments were only for breaking rules we came up with together, right? They don't apply to everyday promises."

"We both agreed to go out tomorrow, didn't we? That's basically the same as making a rule together."

"That's a bit of a stretch, don't you think?"

Calling these little promises "rules" felt like too much, but Miyagi clearly wasn't backing down. She placed her hands on the table and leaned over it.

"We never said punishments only applied to breaking house rules, did we? So I don't think it's strange to punish you for breaking the promise we just decided on, Sendai-san."

Strictly speaking, she wasn't wrong.

We never explicitly stated that punishments were limited to breaking the house rules.

But that didn't mean I had to accept her logic.

It was absurd—unreasonable, even.

Miyagi probably knew that herself as well. She was just saying this

because she knew I'd go along with her ridiculous punishment anyway.

I let out a quiet sigh.

"Fine, fine. I'll let you have this one. But what kind of punishment are you thinking of?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"You're really going to take your time on this?"

"Why not? It's not like there's a deadline for coming up with a punishment."

I had a bad feeling about this.

If I let her take her time, she'd definitely come up with something terrible.

"Then at least decide by tomorrow."

"I can't."

Miyagi rejected that firmly.

"It's not that you can't. You just don't want to. I'm fine with whatever you decide, so just tell me once you've figured it out."

I was used to following her orders anyway.

So I figured I could handle whatever she decided.

I was no stranger to doing questionable things, after all.

So this wasn't really a big deal.

With that in mind, I stood up.

"Anyway, Miyagi. What do you want to do for dinner today?"

I asked.

Volume 6 SS

The Complaints and Dissatisfaction of Shirakawa Ami

(Ami PoV)

Part 126-extra

No matter how many kilometers apart, friends remain friends.

Distance doesn't change that.

We're still friends.

Even with that belief, sometimes the distance feels tiresome.

"I have something I want to ask, is that okay?"

I direct my question to Maika, one of my friends. She's on the other side of the smartphone, in a faraway place.

"Sure, go ahead."

Her bright voice comes through, and I clear my throat. Then, I bring up a topic fitting for the end of April approaching.

"Golden Week! It's our first extended break since entering university! Are you not coming back here for Golden Week, Maika?"

"I'm not coming back, Ami."

Maika replies nonchalantly. I let out a deliberately exaggerated sigh, then speak in a voice heavy enough to sink into the bed.

"That's a grave situation."

"What situation?"

"That one! Not coming back during the holidays is boring."

University life is enjoyable. I've made new friends. But when it comes to spending breaks, the faces of my "usual high school crew" pop into my mind.

"Even if you say it's boring, Golden Week is short. I'll be back during summer vacation, so just wait until then."

"Oh, come on, that's so cruel."

"You knew I wasn't coming back yet you're acting like it's a surprise."

"It just means I really want to see you. Shiori's not coming back either, so it's boring."

There's no lie in what I said. Not being able to easily meet the "usual crew" like before is dull, and that feeling hasn't faded since graduating high school. While I don't mean to question the paths others have chosen, having Shiori not here too is disheartening. I told her many times about my complaints and dissatisfaction.

"Oh, it's just too much," I voice out from deep within.

Being so far apart is unquestionably boring. Not being able to see each other is truly, undeniably dull.

"You mean you're upset Shiori and I aren't coming back for the holidays?"

"That too, but it also feels like I'm the only one stuck far away."

"I'm sorry."

"No, I should apologize. It's not that I want you to say sorry. It's just a rant, a complaint. Even Shiori, who said she'd stay here, ended up over there doing interesting things like room-sharing."

I speak rapidly, then sit up.

The word "room-share" evokes a feeling close to yearning. It might be because, even after entering university, I still live at home just like in high school.

But still, for Shiori to do something like that. She mentioned her

roommate was a relative, but since she'd never talked about relatives before, I was surprised.

"Hey, Maika. Is Shiori really room-sharing with a relative?"

"What do you mean by 'really'?"

"Isn't it actually her boyfriend?"

Just like with family, I haven't heard of her having a boyfriend. Yet curiosity makes me voice such things. I strain to hear Maika's voice through the phone. "Ami, you're curious about that?"

Her voice on the other side sparks my curiosity.

"Of course I am. What's really going on?"

The story of room-sharing with a relative could just be a cover-up for a boyfriend. I imagine going to Shiori's place and an unfamiliar handsome guy shows up.

Such a scenario wouldn't be impossible. In fact, I'm thinking it'd be interesting if it were true.

What I nurture in my heart is this humble wish to do things that amused us in high school, like teasing Shiori for fun.

"I wonder about that. It seems fishy to say she's living with a relative."

Maika speaks in a teasing manner. If we were in a high school classroom, I'd be able to see Maika's sly grin.

"So it is suspicious, after all."

"Even if I say I want to visit her place, she turns me down, and she doesn't even show me pictures."

"Oh, Maika, maybe Shiori just doesn't like you."

"Oof, I thought so."

I hear a deliberately fake sobbing sound, and then both of us burst into laughter.

"Well, joking aside, it is a bit strange. Even when I talk about her roommate, she always brushes it off. I'm curious about what kind of person her 'relative' really is."

Whether I'm talking alone with Shiori or with Maika involved, nothing changes. Shiori seems to avoid words like "room-share" and "roommate," and when I ask to see pictures, she never shows them.

Shiori's roommate remains a complete mystery.

"It does bother me. But pressuring her for details doesn't feel right either."

Maika quietly says, and I agree, "Yeah." It's not a matter we must push to know, so Shiori's feelings take precedence over our curiosity.

I understand that. So I change the subject.

"So, Maika, aren't you coming back during the holidays at all?"

"Unfortunately not, Ami. But I'll be there all summer."

"You promise? I'm counting on it."

Summer vacation feels far off. But it's better than not meeting at all. I want to meet up and do silly things together again.

"Don't worry, I'll come back. Just wait for me."

"I'll be waiting, so hurry back with Shiori."

We may not be high school students anymore, but I still want to hang out like we did in the past. I emphasize, "It's a promise, okay?"

Chapter 41

The Things I Don't Want Sendai-san to Forget (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 127

I picked up the black cat plush from the bookshelf and brought it with me to my bed. It was time to go to sleep, but I wasn't feeling that sleepy yet.

I stroked the black cat plush's head.

Sendai-san hadn't broken a single promise since we'd moved here together, but today, she broke one for the first time. That meant I now had the right to give her an order. Well, strictly speaking, it wasn't exactly an "order," it was just the right to make her do one thing I wanted her to do. But it wasn't something I'd gotten fairly; it was a right I'd obtained rather forcefully.

I sat the black cat plush on my chest.

There were a number of things I could come up with for a punishment.

But I could only choose one thing.

Most likely, Sendai-san would do whatever I asked as long as it wasn't anything too ridiculous. Up until now, she'd accepted and gone along with most of my orders. If I told her to lick my feet, she'd probably do it, and if I asked her to kiss me, she'd probably do that too.

But she would only do it this one time.

And for some reason, Sendai-san had been abiding by the rules pretty well since we moved here, so I had no idea when I'd get the right to do this again.

Thinking about it like that, I wasn't sure what to get Sendai-san to do.

Maybe it was because we were roommates now, but it felt harder to decide compared to when we were in high school. It was like there were some things I wasn't allowed to ask for anymore.

But if that was the case, then what could I get her to do? No matter how much I thought about it, nothing came to mind.

I picked up the black cat plush again and pressed it against the wall. Its nose brushed against the surface, and I quickly pulled it back.

This sort of punishment system was nothing more than something we were just doing for fun.

It wasn't something I needed to think so seriously about.

I should just be more casual about it.

I knew that, but with how Sendai-san suddenly brought up wanting to get a part-time job—something I hadn't heard anything about—it made it hard to relax and think lightly about it.

I left the black cat plush by the wall and turned off the lights, curling up and closing my eyes.

I wished she had told me earlier that she was thinking about a part-time job. When I asked her about it, she said it'd be a private tutoring job, and that she hadn't decided yet whether she'd take it or not—but I felt like she would.

And if she did, she'd end up tutoring someone else the same way she used to tutor me—with that same voice, sitting at that same distance apart, just the two of them, alone.

I doubted she would do anything other than tutoring with her student, but still, I was unamused about the very thought of it.

Ever since we started university, there were more and more parts of Sendai-san that felt unfamiliar to me. She rarely talked about her campus life, and lately, it felt like I only knew about half of her.

I was sure she'd tell me most things if I really asked, but even if I

did, I wasn't sure I wanted to, since I couldn't picture any of it anyway—unlike back in high school. The thought of her getting a part-time job, yet another thing I wouldn't understand or be part of, was giving me a headache.

I pulled the black cat plush under the futon with me.

I'd been sleeping well recently, but tonight it felt like I wouldn't be able to, so I started counting black cats in my head to try to fall asleep. One, then two, then a third. Instead of sheep, I imagined stuffed black cat plushies jumping over a fence.

And as I pictured that, I started imagining Sendai-san as a private tutor.

If she really became a tutor, there was a good chance she'd go back to her old ways and start breaking the rules again. If that happened, I'd have more chances to give her orders through our punishment system.

But still, it irritated me knowing that if that were the case, it meant she would be prioritizing her part-time job. Her promises with me didn't have to come first, but I wanted to make sure she never forgot them.

Something to make sure Sendai-san never forgets her promises with me, huh…

Maybe that was the kind of punishment I should be thinking about.

As I kept counting black cat plushies in my head, I kept mulling it over. I wasn't sure what kind of punishment it'd be exactly, but my mind was getting hazier the more I thought about it.

After counting around three or four hundred black cats, I ended up falling asleep before I could figure out what I wanted to make Sendai-san do.

I woke up five minutes before my alarm went off.

Then, I went to eat the breakfast that Sendai-san had prepared for us today.

She didn't bring up the punishment at all.

Before leaving, she said she'd be home late today—something about that meeting she mentioned yesterday that I didn't really want to hear anything about. After I finished washing the dishes, I got changed and headed out too.

It'd be nice if she didn't end up getting the job.

As the train rocked back and forth, I found myself wishing misfortune on Sendai-san.

As her roommate, I felt like I should be rooting for her. But I couldn't say it out loud. I was the one who told her to start acting more like a proper roommate, and yet here I was, not doing the same. I couldn't help feeling disappointed in myself.

After getting off the train, I walked to campus.

I stepped into the lecture hall, spotted Maika, and sat next to her.

"Good morning."

I called out to her, and she greeted me back.

"It's been a while since I've seen you look this tired, Shiori."

Maika might've changed her look since starting university, but her personality hadn't shifted one bit. She was still as kind and attentive as ever.

"I got too into the book I was reading and couldn't put it down."

I couldn't say that the reason I was unable to sleep was because of Sendai-san.

I leaned back in my seat and looked at Maika.

Her hair was a little longer than mine, tied back in a ponytail, with small accessories peeking out from her earlobes.

"Hey, you said you pierced your ears yourself, right?"

"Yeah."

"Did it hurt?"

"Yeah, it did. Only for a moment, though."

"But it still hurt, huh."

"Well, it wasn't as bad as I expected it to be, but I guess it depends on the person. Why? Are you interested in getting your ears pierced too, Shiori?"

"No, not really."

Small accessories like that were cute.

Watching Maika gradually get cuter made me feel like maybe it'd be okay for me to start putting a little more effort into my appearance too. But I hated pain, even if it was only for a second. If there was a way to pierce my ears without it hurting at all, maybe I'd consider it —but I wasn't about to go out of my way to find out.

I couldn't stop thinking about earrings—probably because back in high school, Sendai-san had been so against the idea of piercing hers.

Lately, I found myself linking everything back to Sendai-san, and it felt like I was constantly thinking about her.

"Why not? There are a lot of cute earrings you could wear. We could even match."

Maika said as she gently tugged on my ear.

"Hmm…"

I took a closer look at her ears.

The earrings were fixed in the holes of her earlobes.

'If only promises could be bound like that, too,' I thought to myself.

But there was no way I'd ever get Sendai-san to pierce her ears.

She'd gone along with most of my orders, but that was the one thing she flat-out refused.

"Well, if you're that curious, why don't we go check out some earrings together? Even if we're just browsing, it could still be fun. You free today?"

I had nothing going on.

Sendai-san was out meeting someone I'd never heard of before, so she wouldn't be home early anyway.

"Yeah, I'm free. Let's go today."

I always had fun spending time with Maika, and I didn't feel like being home by myself.

Besides, chances were, Sendai-san would be having dinner with someone else.

I didn't know if I'd actually buy anything, but at the very least, I had plans to spend time with Maika once classes were over.

The Things I Don't Want Sendai-san to Forget (II)

Part 128

Inside the bag I was holding was something I'd bought while hanging out with Maika.

I'd wanted to give it to Sendai-san after we had doria last night, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I'd been hesitating all day today too, and even after dinner, I still hadn't worked up the nerve.

I paced around my bedroom and came to a stop in front of my bookshelf, letting out a sigh.

The black cat plush stared back at me.

What should I do?

After thinking it over for a bit, I stepped out of my room and looked around our shared space.

Since she wasn't here, Sendai-san must've been in her own room.

I picked up the platypus tissue box sitting on top of one of our storage bins and knocked on her door—my first time doing so since we moved in.

I knocked three times, the sound echoing faintly in return.

A moment later, I heard her voice from inside, and then her door creaked open.

"What's up?"

"Let me in. I've decided on your punishment."

"Right now?"

Sendai-san sounded unsure as her eyes flicked toward the paper bag

and tissue box I was holding.

"Yes, right now. It won't take long. If you really don't want me in your room, we can do it out here instead."

When I'd left my room, it was just after nine—not too late, not too early for bed. There was plenty of time.

The punishment I had in mind wasn't anything serious. All she had to do was use what was inside the paper bag. It wouldn't take long, and it wasn't anything difficult either.

"We can do it in my room. Come in."

Sendai-san stepped aside and opened the door wider.

For a second, I considered saying "Pardon the intrusion," but ended up walking in without a word.

There was a small nightstand next to her bed, a desk, and a bookshelf.

It was my first time inside her room since we moved here. The layout was different from her old place.

She never had many books or a bookshelf at all, and the metal bed frame from her last room was gone. I hadn't been in her old room often enough to feel nostalgic, but somehow, I couldn't get used to this one being hers either.

It left a strange, uncomfortable feeling in my chest.

"Sit wherever you want."

She said as she sat down, leaning back against her bed.

I hesitated for a moment before sitting down right next to her.

"So, what's this for?"

She tapped the platypus tissue box.

"It's a tissue box cover."

"No, I know that. Are we using it for the punishment or something?"

"Probably."

"What do you mean, ‘probably’? What exactly do you want me to do?"

"Here. This is what you’ll be using for the punishment."

I handed her the paper bag and moved the tissue box to the table.

"What’s in here?"

"Take a look yourself."

She peeked inside the bag.

"Miyagi, this…"

She said, her voice lower than usual, her expression stiffening.

She slowly took the contents out one by one and laid them on the table.

A piercing gun. Disinfectant. Cotton balls.

All the things you’d need to pierce an earlobe.

Sendai-san let out a long, heavy sigh.

"…You’re not allowed to do this kind of thing, remember? I said I’d do one thing you told me to, but that doesn’t mean I’ll do anything."

"But we never said piercings were off-limits, did we?"

"No, but I feel like it should go without saying that any punishment that leaves a permanent mark is crossing the line."

Sendai-san wasn’t angry, but her voice was laced with exasperation. That was the exact kind of response I’d been expecting.

I picked up the ear piercer from the table and pushed it into her hands.

"Well, I'm saying it isn't crossing the line."

"Miyagi. Even if you're fine with it, I'm not."

"It doesn't matter what you think. I'm the one getting pierced."

"… Huh?"

"There's nothing confusing about it. You're going to pierce my ears, Sendai-san."

If I'd told her she was the one getting her ears pierced, she definitely would've refused. So I thought about how else I could get her to keep her promises.

It didn't take long to come up with something.

I'd just have to carve those promises into myself.

It was my body. I could do whatever I wanted with it.

And as long as it wasn't her ears being pierced, Sendai-san shouldn't have had any problem doing what I asked.

"I'm the one who's supposed to be getting punished, right?"

"Yeah, so do what I say. It's not like it'll be hard—you just have to use that on me."

I said, pointing at the piercing gun in her hands.

"This feels… weird."

"It's not weird at all."

"Have you always wanted to get your ears pierced?"

"Not really. I don't like pain, and I'm not that into earrings."

I made sure to emphasize that it wasn't something I wanted.

"Then why do you want me to do it?"

"So you won't forget your promises with me anymore."

"Huh? What do you mean by that?"

Even though I didn't have a part-time job myself, I knew that if she started working as a private tutor, her schedule would become too rigid to shift things around. And that meant her promises with me could easily be forgotten, cancelled, or delayed.

I knew it was selfish, but I really hated it when our promises got brushed off. Regardless of whether she took the job or not, I didn't want the things she promised me to be forgotten.

So, I decided to use my own body to give those promises a little more weight.

"If you did something drastic like piercing my ears, it'd make things harder to forget, right? I wanted it to be so that every time you saw them, you'd remember the promises you made with me."

There was a limit to how much we could remember—we couldn't hold on to everything that had ever happened.

But if something was memorable enough, it tended to stick.

So if I tied our promises to my piercings, they wouldn't be so easy to let slip.

And that was why I needed Sendai-san to be the one to pierce my ears for me.

"I want you to remember every time you break a promise to me and reflect on it."

"Are you being serious?"

"I am."

"Well, I think you should pierce them yourself, Miyagi. If I do it when you don't even want them, it'll feel like I'm forcing it on you."

"No. You're the one who needs to do it because I don't want them. I want you to regret it, and I want you to feel like you did something wrong."

I wanted Sendai-san to feel even more guilty.

I wanted her to remember it vividly—that she'd forced these piercings on me even after I told her I didn't want them.

"— I've never used one of these before."

Sendai-san sighed as she opened the piercing gun's packaging. She pulled out the instruction sheet and started reading.

"You've never pierced anyone's ears before? Not Ibaraki-san, or someone else?"

"Nope. Everyone else did it themselves. You're the first person I'll be using this on."

Knowing that made me feel a little relieved.

If it was her first time, that meant it would leave an even stronger impression in her memory.

I started explaining the process to her.

First, she had to disinfect my earlobes. Then, mark the spots with a pen.

It probably wasn't much different from what the instructions said, but I walked her through it anyway.

"Okay, I'll start with disinfecting your ears."

Sendai-san tucked my hair behind my ears and dabbed the disinfectant just as the instructions said. Then she gently tugged at my earlobe, as if double-checking her work.

"You know it doesn't mean anything if you're going to touch it right after disinfecting it, right?"

I slapped her arm.

But she didn't let go.

She kept tugging at my earlobe.

"It tickles, you know."

"I just wanted to savor your ears a little before poking holes in them."

She finally pulled her hand away.

Her fingertips brushed behind my ear, then slid down to my neck.

The ticklish feeling only got worse.

It was supposed to just be her fingers, but now her entire palm was pressed against my neck. I could feel her body heat sinking into me, and it felt like she was going to lean in even closer. I quickly pushed her back by the shoulders.

"Disinfect it again."

"Okay."

She wiped down my earlobe again with cotton and picked up a pen.

Maybe it was the disinfectant, but my ear felt slightly cold.

"Where do you want them?"

"Anywhere's fine."

"Then I'll decide for you."

She hesitated a bit, then drew a small mark on my earlobe. After that, she picked up the piercing gun.

"You're really sure about this?"

"Yeah."

It was definitely going to hurt.

Maika had said it wasn't as painful as she expected, but I didn't buy it. There was no way getting a thick needle shoved through your earlobe didn't hurt. What scared me most was not knowing how bad it would actually be.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

But no matter how long I waited, the pain didn't come.

"Sendai-san, are you done yet?"

I opened my eyes.

"Not yet. I was just wondering if you really meant it."

"I already told you I did."

"Okay… then I'm really going to do it."

Sendai-san said in an unusually anxious voice, as if trying to confirm with me one last time.

"Stop hesitating. Just hurry up and do it already, Sendai-san."

I almost said, "I'm scared," but managed to swallow the words.

"Well, here goes nothing…"

Sendai-san said as I felt the piercing gun press against my ear.

I shut my eyes and clenched my hands into tight fists. A loud snapping sound echoed in my eardrum, followed by a sharp sting. The pain didn't last long—it wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be. What lingered was the strange tingling in my earlobe.

"Okay, I'm going to do this one next."

I felt the cotton ball against my other ear, followed by the same cold sensation.

This time, I kept my eyes open and looked straight at Sendai-san.

"I'm going to do it now," she said. A second later, the same snap rang out, and the sting followed right after.

Sendai-san let out a breath and set the piercing gun down on the table.

"Are you okay?"

She asked as she dabbed disinfectant onto my freshly pierced ears.

"That hurt a lot. My earlobes are still tingling."

I said, exaggerating the pain a little. It hadn't actually hurt that much. I touched one of my earlobes, and my fingertip brushed against something that hadn't been there before—a small, round accessory. There was something behind my earlobe, too.

"Do you want to have a look?"

Sendai-san asked, holding out a mirror.

I looked at my ears.

Now there were small, silver accessories in them.

They didn't match Maika's exactly, but they looked somewhat similar. Just having something new on me made it feel like something about me had changed, too.

"It feels kind of strange."

I said, touching my earlobes again as I glanced away from the mirror—only to meet Sendai-san's gaze. She was staring right back at me.

"It looks good on you."

I didn't know if she meant it or not, but she smiled.

The Things I Don't Want Sendai-san to Forget (III)

Part 129

Sendai-san sometimes said things in a way that made it hard to tell whether she meant them or not.

So when she said that my new earrings looked good on me, I couldn't tell if she really meant it. Her smile felt like it was trying to hide how she was actually feeling, and I couldn't trust it.

Not knowing what to say, I brushed my fingertips against the earrings and glanced at them.

"I thought there'd be at least a little blood."

Even though I'd touched my ear, which had just been pierced, there was nothing on my fingers. I wasn't entirely sure how it worked, but apparently piercing your ears didn't make it bleed all that much.

"Wait, did you bring this platypus here in case you did bleed?"

Sendai-san picked up the platypus with tissues sprouting from its back and gave its head a small pat as she spoke.

"Yeah."

I'd read online that ear piercings didn't usually bleed, and Maika had said hers hadn't either. Still, I'd brought tissues just in case something did happen. It turned out they weren't necessary, though.

"You're such a scaredy-cat, Miyagi. And a total worrywart."

Sendai-san made the platypus wave its arms as she said that.

"I wasn't scared, and I'm not a worrywart."

"You were flinching the whole time I was piercing your ears."

"You looked even more nervous than I did, Sendai-san."

"Well, yeah. It would've been awful if the piercings ended up crooked."

Her gaze moved from the platypus to my ear, then she fell silent.

"Why'd you suddenly go quiet?"

"Can I touch your ears?"

Before I could say no, she reached out her arm out toward me, and I smacked her hand away.

"No. You're not supposed to touch it right after they've been pierced."

"But you were just touching them yourself."

"I was going to disinfect them again, so it's fine."

"Well, if you were planning to disinfect them again anyway, you should just let me touch them then."

"No. And why should I let you touch them anyway?"

"I just want to make sure your earrings aren't crooked. It's fine as long as I don't touch the actual piercings, right?"

"You don't need to touch them to see if they're straight, right? They look fine, so there's nothing to check, Sendai-san."

There was no need to confirm anything.

A quick glance in the mirror was enough to show that they weren't crooked.

She was obviously just making up an excuse to do something weird. Sendai-san always did this kind of thing whenever I let my guard down.

"Hey, Miyagi. Did you know?"

Unsure if she'd given up on touching my ear, her tone suddenly

softened.

"What?"

"They say it hurts more after you get your ears pierced than during."

"I know. I read that online, too."

"I see."

Sendai-san set the platypus down on the floor and took my right hand in hers. I instinctively tried to pull away, but she held on tighter and pulled me closer—and then something warm brushed just above my earlobe.

I could tell right away that it was her lips.

Her fingers gripped my wrist, tight enough to sting a little.

But more than anything, I was focused on my ear. It felt a little ticklish, almost nice, and my heart was beating faster than before. It had been a while since I'd felt her like this.

This was all Sendai-san's fault.

She pulled away for a moment, then pressed her lips against my ear even more firmly than before.

Heat spread across my skin. My ear felt like it was burning.

I shoved her away with my left hand, pushing at her shoulder as hard as I could.

"Don't do such weird stuff out of nowhere. You'll get germs in it."

"I didn't touch the piercing itself, so it should be fine. And it wasn't something "weird." It was a charm to take the pain away."

She said, referring to something she'd done before.

But I knew it was something she'd just made up.

It hadn't hurt badly enough to make a fuss over. And even after she performed her little charm, my ears still stung.

"Stuff like that isn't actually going to make the pain go away, you know."

"Well, it's not the kind of charm that works instantly."

"Stop making things up on the spot, Sendai-san."

"But you know my charms do work, don't you?"

The last time Sendai-san performed one of her "charms" on me, she'd said it would help me write the right answers on my entrance exams.

Whether or not it had actually helped me pass… I wasn't sure.

No—realistically, it hadn't been because of the charm. It was because I'd studied, and because Sendai-san had been there to help me, too. Her charm had probably had nothing to do with it.

"You call it a "charm," but it's really just an excuse to do whatever you want, isn't it?"

"Then what do you want to do, Miyagi?"

"Anything other than whatever it is you want."

"So if I said I didn't want to cast a charm on you, does that mean you would do it to me instead?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Then stop arguing and let me do it."

Sendai-san tugged on my arm again. I nearly lost my balance, and I peeled her hand off my wrist.

"Hey, Sendai-san—!"

Before I could finish speaking, she grabbed my shoulder.

She leaned in, and her lips brushed against the top of my ear.

This was the closest we'd gotten since we started living together.

Ever since we began living together, Sendai-san's lips had never come this close to my body—and I'd been careful to make sure situations like this didn't happen. I'd done my best to keep a proper distance between us as roommates. But right now, she was so close, all of that effort was falling apart, and she was touching me.

"Miyagi."

She said my name beside my ear.

Her breath tickled.

Her lips pressed against my ear again, and it started to heat up.

She was too close.

I knew I should move.

But unlike before, I couldn't bring myself to push her away.

Then something else brushed against my ear—it was the tip of her tongue, lightly wetting my skin. Just like she'd said, she was being careful not to touch the piercing itself.

Her tongue moved slowly, and I felt a chill run down my spine.

It was ticklish and gross.

She licked the surface of my ear, tracing it with her tongue, and my breath caught in my throat. But then, that uncomfortable feeling started to melt into something different—something that almost felt good.

I let out a big breath and shoved her away by the shoulder.

"Hey, Sendai-san! Back off."

I put more force into my hands, and Sendai-san finally backed off.

We were still closer than we should be as roommates, but at least not close enough for her to kiss my ear anymore.

I grabbed a tissue from the platypus tissue box nearby and wiped

my ear.

Then, I smacked Sendai-san's thigh with the platypus.

"Ouch."

Sendai-san said, as if to exaggerate the pain.

"I told you to stop doing weird stuff like this. Roommates don't do things like this with each other."

"Why not? Roommates can give each other charms, too, can't they?"

"Yeah, but not these kinds of charms. You seriously need to start acting like a proper roommate, Sendai-san."

"But you're the one who—"

She trailed off.

"I'm the one who what?"

"… You're the one who asked me to pierce your ears, Miyagi."

"Yeah, but I never said you could do anything else."

I smacked her with the platypus again.

"Ow."

"I'm the one who's in pain here. Disinfect my ears again."

I handed her the cotton and disinfectant.

She took them without a word, soaked the cotton, and gently pressed it against my earrings.

Once she disinfected both, she pulled the cotton away.

My ears felt cold.

Unlike when her lips or tongue had touched them.

It was so much warmer when she'd touched them earlier—

I lifted my hand toward my ear again, but stopped halfway and balled it into a fist.

"I'm going back to my room."

I put the piercing gun, disinfectant, and cotton back into a paper bag and stood up. As I did, Sendai-san tugged on my clothes.

"Miyagi."

"What?"

"I said it earlier too, but I really do think the earrings look good on you. They're cute."

"You don't have to flatter me. They're not even meant to look nice or anything."

The earrings that I had bought along with the piercing gun were just basic studs meant to keep the holes open. I picked them for the material, not the design. They were medical-grade stainless steel—nothing about them was meant to be cute in the way Sendai-san was making them out to be.

"Still, I think they look cute on you."

"Whatever you say."

I turned my back to her.

I took one step. Then another. And then her voice stopped me again.

"Wait, what about this?"

I turned around and saw her holding the platypus tissue box.

"Just keep it in your room, Sendai-san."

"But I already have my own tissue box."

I walked back over, took the platypus from her hands, removed the cover from the box, and handed the cover to her.

"Here."

"You want me to use this on my tissue box?"

"It'll look better with it. But if you don't want it, I'll just put it back where it was."

"Okay, I'll use it. Hand it over."

Sendai-san took the cover back from me and added, like she'd just remembered:

"Oh, one more thing."

"What?"

"Are you free during Golden Week?"

It wasn't something I expected her to ask, but I didn't even need to check a calendar to give her an answer.

"Yeah, but whatever you're planning, the answer's no."

"I haven't even told you what it is yet."

"You were going to ask if I wanted to go somewhere with you, weren't you?"

"… Well, yeah."

"If you can come up with something else, I'll think about it."

Sendai-san and I didn't have the same interests. Honestly, I wasn't even sure what hers were. We had different friends, different universities, and even liked different kinds of movies. Staying in together made more sense than going out.

"Then make sure you leave some room in your schedule open. I'll come up with something."

She said that as she gently patted the head of the platypus, now slumped over without its tissue box.

"Okay."

I turned my back to her again.

As I opened the door, she said, “Good night,” and I answered with the same.

Chapter 42

What I Want To Be Certain of With Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 130

Ever since the day I pierced Miyagi's ears, she had started coming to my room—though it had only happened twice so far.

The first time was when she came to deliver the manga I'd asked for before. Miyagi had brought it over, handed it to me, and then immediately went back to her room. The second time was today. We were eating dinner together and I'd asked to borrow her dictionary, and she brought it over to my room again.

I already had the same dictionary in my room, so I didn't really need to borrow hers. I just wanted to see if Miyagi would come over to my room again. I was pretty sure she'd realized the dictionary was just an excuse, but she still came anyway, and now she was sitting beside me.

It was probably because she was bored now that Golden Week had started.

Or maybe it was because I'd asked her to keep part of her schedule open for me during the break.

I wasn't sure. But either way, she was here right now, reading the manga she'd lent me.

I closed the manga I'd been reading and held the platypus's hand.

For a long time, my usual spot had been next to Miyagi, and hers had been next to mine. But ever since we moved here, we'd spent less time together, and it left me feeling a little unsettled.

If only I could come up with something to talk about with Miyagi. Maybe that would help me keep my mind off things. But nothing

came to me. Miyagi was reading her manga, and there was no reason to force a conversation. If I said something unnecessary, she might find me annoying. I knew it was better to stay quiet, but still —seeing her sitting right next to me, I couldn't help wanting to talk to her.

I let go of the platypus's hand for a moment, then grabbed it again.

There was no warmth in its small, fluffy and unreliable hands.

Maybe the platypus, which had somehow ended up in my room, was Miyagi's way of saying she planned to keep coming over. If that wasn't it, then whether my tissue box had a cover shouldn't have mattered. Either way, I still had no idea why she wanted to keep coming here.

I continued to hold onto the platypus's hand tightly.

"Sendai-san, you must really like that, don't you?"

Miyagi, who had been completely silent until now, suddenly spoke. When I looked up at her from the platypus, she was watching me, even though just moments ago she'd seemed absorbed in her manga.

"What are you referring to?"

"The platypus. You've been playing with it for a while, so I figured you must've taken a liking to it or something."

"Well, not exactly…"

I gave the platypus a few pats on the head as I answered. It wasn't like I was embarrassed she'd caught me fiddling with a tissue cover, but I pulled my hands away from it anyway. I reopened the manga I'd been reading earlier and leaned back against the bed. I turned a page, then another, and another—until I'd flipped through five.

Then Miyagi's voice broke the silence again.

"… When are you going to start working as a private tutor?"

I closed the manga I'd just opened and looked over at her.

After I'd heard more about the job from Mio's upperclassman, I'd

decided I would take the job on the spot.

"I start after the break. What about you, Miyagi? Are you planning to find a part-time job, too?"

"No."

"What about joining a club?"

"I'm not interested in that sort of thing. What about you, Sendai-san?"

"I probably won't join one either. I want to spend my time on other things."

My new university friends wouldn't stop talking about which clubs were worth joining. It felt like being in a club was just something you were supposed to do in university. A few people even asked me what I planned to join, but I didn't really feel like broadening my social circle. I didn't want to spend time with people just for the sake of it anymore. Working a part-time job felt like a better use of my time. And if Miyagi was home, I wanted to be with her—even if all we did was eat together.

"I honestly thought you'd be the type to join a club and start going on group blind dates as soon as you got into university."

"Do I really look like someone who'd do that?"

"Yeah, and you seem like someone who'd go out and have fun every day during Golden Week."

Miyagi said with a serious look on her face. She didn't seem to be joking at all.

"I'm not like that. I prefer to stay home."

"Why's that?"

"Why? … I wonder."

It's because you're here.

It really was just that, but the more I thought about it, the more I

realized how weird it would sound if I said it out loud. Miyagi and I weren't close enough to go out together all the time, or to spend time with each other like it was normal. But I did want to hang out with her, even if I was the only one who felt that way. And every once in a while, Miyagi would let me have that.

I kept a sigh from leaving my throat.

"Didn't you say you had plans during Golden Week, Miyagi?"

All I knew was that she had a few days free.

I didn't know anything else about her plans beyond that, though.

"Yeah, I have plans to hang out with Maika."

That was exactly what I'd expected. Yet, it still made me sigh—audibly, this time.

"We should go out together sometime as well."

"I'm already going to different places with Maika, so no. Besides, we don't even have the same interests, Sendai-san."

Miyagi said as if it were obvious—just like she'd done the other day, completely shutting down the idea of going out together.

She'd go out with Utsunomiya, but not with me.

Just hearing that stung.

I wasn't happy about about that at all, and it made my stomach feel heavy.

"Yeah, but still…"

Even if we didn't share the same interests, there were still places I wanted to go with her.

Her ears were hidden beneath her hair, but right now, she was wearing a pair of earrings.

Only, I hadn't been the one to choose them.

If possible, I wanted her to wear a pair that I picked out for her.

If the whole reason she'd had her ears pierced was to make sure I'd never forget my promises with her, then I wanted the earrings she wore to be ones I chose.

I wanted to go look for earrings together—ones that would suit her better.

But I was well aware she'd never go and look for earrings together with me.

"Miyagi, when's your birthday?"

I doubted she'd accept a birthday gift, but I asked anyway.

"Where did that come from all of a sudden?"

"I just realized you never told me."

"September."

"I remember you mentioned that, but what day exactly?"

I'd found out about her birth month when she gave me the pendant, but she'd never said the exact date.

"… I don't want to tell you right now."

She frowned, probably sensing what I was thinking.

"Then tell me eventually."

"Only if I feel like it."

Her voice was cold as she turned her eyes back to her manga.

A bit too cold for someone who'd chosen to sit right next to me.

"Did you choose those earrings yourself?"

"Yeah, I went shopping for them with Maika."

All Miyagi had given me today was information I hadn't wanted.

I'd started this conversation because I wanted to talk to her—but not about things I didn't want to hear. I wanted it to be something more fun.

"Put your hair behind your ears."

I said as I reached out and tugged lightly at her hair, but she didn't look up from her manga.

"Why should I?"

"Because I can't see your earrings."

"You don't need to see them."

"Didn't you get them pierced just so I could see them?"

"Yeah, but we haven't made any promises together yet."

"We promised to spend part of Golden Week together, didn't we?"

That probably wasn't the kind of promise she meant when she made me pierce her ears.

Even so, I still wanted to make sure the earrings were there.

Of course, she shouldn't have taken them out so soon—not while they were still healing. It should've gone without saying they were still in.

But even knowing that, I wanted to see them.

The earrings in her ears. The holes I'd made.

Back in high school, Miyagi had wanted to look at the pendant I wore.

Right now, I felt the same.

"Show me your earrings."

I reached for her right ear. Miyagi looked like she wanted to say something, but didn't pull away. I gently tucked her black hair

behind her ear.

A silver earring came into view.

The piercings I'd given Miyagi felt like a symbol—like she belonged to me. I knew that wasn't true. But still, the fact that she'd asked me to do it, and that I'd done it with my own hands, made it feel special.

I wanted to touch the earring, but stopped myself. It wasn't a good idea to mess with it while it was still healing.

"That's enough, isn't it?"

As Miyagi tried to hide her ear with her hair again, I caught her hand.

Then, just like the day I pierced her ears, I brought my lips to her ear.

Miyagi had done something similar to me once.

She'd kissed the pendant I used to wear and touched it many times.

"Sendai-san!"

I heard her voice close.

I gently ran my tongue over the earring, careful not to touch the hole itself.

It felt a little cold and a little hard.

I pressed my tongue against it, as if to warm it up.

Miyagi's shoulders trembled.

At some point, her hand had started to grip my arm tightly.

I kissed her ear again—once, then twice.

The third time, my lips landed just above the piercing.

"That hurts."

Miyagi said as she pushed me away.

I pulled back and looked at her face, but she didn't look like she was in real pain.

"Then I guess I'll just have to do it where it doesn't hurt."

I brushed the top of her ear with my lips.

Miyagi pushed me again.

"Back off, Sendai-san."

As if to say no, I pressed my lips even harder against her ear. She brought her hand to my chin and started pushing me away, so I backed away. I reached for her hand, wanting to protest—but she pulled me in instead.

Then, my earlobe burned.

It hurt—a lot.

Something hard was pinching it.

It was Miyagi's teeth.

She was biting me.

Miyagi never held back in moments like this. Her teeth clamped down on my ear with full force. It hurt so much it felt hot. It honestly felt like she was going too far just to retaliate. At this rate, it wouldn't have been surprising if she bit it off entirely.

The pain started to go numb.

I should push her away, I thought.

But instead, I wrapped my arms around her back.

I knew I was acting weird.

Still, I pulled her in close and held her tight.

Then the pain in my ear faded. Miyagi had let go.

She was in my arms now. She felt so, so close. Her warmth seeped into me everywhere we touched. I wanted even more of it, but there was no way to get closer than this.

She pulled away first.

"What, you want me to bite you again or something?"

Miyagi said angrily.

"What would you do if I said yes?"

"You really are a pervert, Sendai-san."

Even though there was no need to push me any further, she shoved me again to put more distance between us. Then she took a tissue from the platypus tissue box and wiped her ear.

"Sendai-san, wipe your ear too."

She shoved the platypus toward me.

I appreciated the concern, but if she really cared, she shouldn't have bitten me in the first place.

I touched my half-numb ear and pulled out a tissue. She probably wouldn't listen even if I did complain, so I wiped my ear without saying anything.

"So, you said you wanted to do something together during the break. What was it?"

Miyagi asked softly.

I thought she'd get up and leave right after, but she stayed next to me. Though she still didn't look my way.

"Is there anything you want to do, Miyagi?"

"I want to use that."

She pointed toward the table.

"The tablet?"

This room no longer had the things my old room used to, but there were new additions. One of them was the tablet sitting on the table, which now served as a TV.

"Yeah. I want to use it to watch something, like a movie."

That didn’t sound like a bad idea.

Actually, it was probably the only thing I could think of that didn’t involve going outside.

"Can we watch it here?"

"Fine. As long as you don’t try anything weird."

"I won’t."

"You literally just did, though."

"I promise I won’t do anything weird."

I said, and Miyagi finally turned to face me.

I tucked her hair behind her ear again and looked at her earring.

Those earrings felt like proof that I’d changed something about her.

It wasn’t a big deal to most people—just a tiny accessory, barely noticeable—but to me, it was unforgettable.

My existence had left a mark on Miyagi’s body.

In a way that wouldn’t go away anytime soon.

Whatever promise I made with her, I wasn’t going to forget it now.

"You better not break that promise."

"Don’t worry, I won’t."

I lightly touched her earring, then let her hair fall back over it.

If all she wanted was to make me remember the promises we made, she could've just written it down on paper or stuck a note on my door or something.

But instead, she chose to tie it to a piercing.

That's why I wasn't going to break my promises with her.

But at the same time, I wanted to break the rules, just so she'd have a reason to give me orders again.

Not that I'd ever tell Miyagi that, though.

What I Want To Be Certain of With Miyagi (II)

Part 131

The weather outside today was horrible.

Most people would probably complain about a downpour during the holidays, but since I was spending my time at home, it didn't really matter to me. The real problem wasn't the weather—it was that the movie playing on my tablet was really boring to watch.

"Do you think it's good so far?"

I asked Miyagi, who was staring intently at the screen while sitting beside me.

"It's pretty good."

"What do you like about it?"

"Hmm, a lot of things, I guess."

Miyagi replied, not actually answering my question.

Some kind of weird looking character was moving around on the screen. Miyagi was so focused on it that she didn't even bother turning to me when I spoke.

Watching a movie on my tablet had been Miyagi's suggestion for what we could do together over the break, and honestly, it made sense. We didn't have much in common, so this was probably the most reasonable option. But because we didn't have much in common, we didn't like the same kinds of movies either. I'd told her to pick whatever she wanted, but maybe I should've thought that through a little more before saying it.

Apparently, the movie was based on a game. I had found it interesting at first, but somewhere along the way, the story got confusing. I wasn't sure if that was because I didn't really play

games, or if it had nothing to do with that. Either way, I wasn't enjoying it anymore.

"What parts do you like the most about it, Miyagi?"

I poked Miyagi, who was sitting close enough that our shoulders were almost touching.

Miyagi didn't react or say anything.

Her lack of reaction felt lame to me, too.

To be honest, I was getting tired of the whole situation.

It was boring.

I was glad we were in my room—if we'd been at a movie theater, I wouldn't have been able to say anything even if I was bored.

"Hey, Miyagi."

When I poked her again, Miyagi reached for the tablet to pause the movie.

"Sendai-san, you've been talking nonstop for a while now. You don't have to watch the movie if you don't want to, but be quiet."

She said as she pushed my shoulder with the same hand she had used to pause the movie.

It wasn't a strong push—just a light one, so I could tell she wasn't angry. But her voice was a little low, and she looked annoyed. I guess it was nice that she found the movie interesting enough to not want to be interrupted, but the more Miyagi was into the movie, the less attention she had for me, and things felt unbalanced. It always felt like it was hard to make the time she spent with me enjoyable.

"I'll get us something to drink. Want anything?"

I stood up, hoping to change my mood.

"Soda."

She answered in a flat tone.

"Okay. Feel free to keep watching without me."

I left the room and walked over to the cupboard. I took out two cups and let out a quiet sigh.

I should've just picked a horror movie without asking Miyagi and scared her with it. Made her feel like she didn't want to be alone in her own room at night. I doubted Miyagi would sit through a whole horror movie without saying something about it, but I should've gone with that anyway.

"… Well, if I'd actually done that, she probably would've kicked me or bit me."

I took out bottles of orange juice and soda from the fridge and poured them into cups. After wondering for a bit if I should just carry them as they were, I decided to grab a tray and brought them back to my room.

I set a glass filled with clear liquid and another with orange liquid next to the tablet.

"Thanks."

Miyagi said without taking her eyes off the screen.

I sat down beside her again and stared at her instead of the screen.

She was wearing a thick hoodie and jeans.

She was dressed warmly, probably because the weather was bad and it was cold out. It was just like Miyagi to be sensitive to the cold. A stark contrast to me, wearing only a shirt and a long skirt.

Her hairstyle was the same as always, which meant that her ears were hidden today as well.

Even though she'd gone through the trouble of having them pierced, Miyagi still wouldn't show them to me. I'd told her to leave them visible, but she never did. Maybe she was embarrassed—or maybe not. I didn't know why, but the fact that she kept them hidden only made me want to see them more.

I reached out toward Miyagi, whose eyes were still fixed on the tablet.

I touched the hair that was covering her ear.

Miyagi immediately brushed my hand away with an annoyed look, but I reached out again anyway and tucked her hair behind her ear.

The moment I caught sight of her earring, Miyagi paused the movie again.

"Stop bothering me."

I didn’t say anything. Instead, I touched her neck.

Miyagi frowned as my fingertips traced along it.

"Sendai-san, move away from me."

She pushed my shoulders firmly and put the platypus between us.

"Don’t cross this line where the tissue box is until the movie’s over."

She said something completely lame.

I stayed quiet, and the movie she’d paused started playing again.

Not wanting to get on her nerves more than I already had, I picked up my orange juice.

I drank about half of it, then set it back down on the table.

"Hey, Miyagi."

I called out, already knowing she wouldn’t answer.

Her eyes stayed fixed on the screen. She didn’t look at me.

"I want to kiss you."

I’d promised not to do anything weird, so I wasn’t actually going to do it.

I didn’t think it was something that would be considered weird, but

Miyagi probably would. Still, just saying it out loud should've been fine.

"Miyagi."

I called out again to her, but she still wouldn't look at me.

"Why do I have to kiss you, Sendai-san?"

She spoke in a sulky voice, her eyes still glued to the screen.

"Because we used to do it all the time before."

"Things are different now. We're supposed to be roommates."

Miyagi finally looked at me.

I didn't like what she said, but she wasn't wrong.

I moved the platypus to the bed and leaned in toward her.

"Sendai-san, you're heavy."

She said bluntly, but she didn't push me away.

"Don't you want to kiss me too, Miyagi?"

"I don't."

"I thought you'd say that."

"Then why'd you even bother asking?"

Her eyes returned to the screen.

The tablet continued playing loudly, and the volume somehow seemed even louder now.

"Miyagi, give me an order. I'll do anything you ask of me right now."

"I don't want to, and you don't need to do that either."

She rejected everything I said, but today, that actually came as a bit of a relief. Even after getting her ears pierced, Miyagi was still

Miyagi.

I wanted her to change. But at the same time, I was scared she would change. I was afraid that if I ever went too far, Miyagi might decide to move out. So for now, I was glad she kept turning me down. If she hadn't, I knew I wouldn't be able to hold back. I'd want more, and I wouldn't be able to stop myself.

"Sendai-san, you don't even want to watch a movie with me, do you?"

Miyagi pushed me away.

We were once again just far enough apart that I wouldn't be crossing the line if the platypus were here.

"I do want to watch movies with you. But this one's kind of boring."

I turned off the tablet.

"I was still watching that, you know."

"Let's watch something else. Like, you know, a horror movie."

"Absolutely not."

Miyagi glared at me, clearly annoyed.

And even though she'd just been the one not letting me touch her, this time she reached out to me. The platypus wasn't between us anymore, but if it had been, she would've crossed the line. She held tightly onto the front of my shirt without hesitation, so I grabbed her hand.

"If you pull that hard, it'll stretch out my clothes."

It wasn't anything expensive, but I still didn't want it ruined. Miyagi ignored me and pulled even harder. Not wanting my shirt to get messed up, I leaned in toward her.

"I told you to let go already."

I tried to pry her hand off, but I couldn't. Miyagi's face drew closer, and she blew a breath on my neck. My shoulders jerked on reflex.

She leaned in more, and something warm touched me.

Her lips pressed against my neck, and she sucked hard on my skin.

It didn’t hurt like a needle prick, but it still stung.

Her tongue touched me. It was warm.

Miyagi didn’t stop.

She’s too close…

I could hear my own heartbeat—loud and clear.

Louder than the movie from earlier.

Her lips pressed down harder, and she sucked more forcefully.

The pain seeped through my skin and slowly spread deeper.

It was definitely going to leave a mark.

This wasn’t good.

But even knowing that, I couldn’t stop myself from wanting to wrap my arms around her.

Not knowing what else to do, I reached up and stroked her hair.

That made Miyagi finally let go.

The pain faded away.

I couldn’t see my neck, but I had a pretty good idea of what was there.

"You’re so stupid, Miyagi. You definitely left a mark on me just now."

"Well, that’s your own fault, Sendai-san."

She said, sounding annoyed, as she continued staring at my neck.

"Yeah, but there are some things you just don’t do, you know."

I already had a pretty good idea of what was on my neck just from the way she was looking at it, but I grabbed a hand mirror and checked anyway.

Sure enough, a red mark stood out clearly on the side of my neck.

"Hey, Miyagi. If you're going to leave a mark, do it somewhere people can't see it. What am I supposed to do with this?"

"If I put it somewhere you couldn't see it, then you wouldn't reflect on your actions."

"This isn't the time to be thinking about stuff like that. You're the worst for leaving a mark this obvious."

"You said you weren't going anywhere over the break, so who cares where it is?"

"Even though you're going out with Utsunomiya?"

"Yeah, I am, but you're the one staying home."

Miyagi shoved my shoulder again.

"You should stay home too, Miyagi."

"No. I already promised Maika we'd hang out."

Annoying.

So annoying.

So, so annoying.

I was really annoyed.

I looked at the mirror again.

The red mark was impossible to miss.

And it was right out in the open.

I'd been thinking of maybe hanging out with some friends over the

break, but I couldn't show up like this. If I could wear a turtleneck, I might be able to cover it, but it wasn't the right season for that. If I went out with this thing on my neck, someone would definitely say something. And if I tried lying and said I had a boyfriend, they'd want pictures or ask to meet him, so it wasn't like I could say something careless either.

Miyagi was always like this, doing things that were way too extreme.

She said she didn't want to kiss me, but then went and did something like this without even hesitating. Normal roommates wouldn't do this kind of thing. I had no idea what kind of relationship Miyagi wanted with me. And I didn't even know what kind of relationship I wanted with her. It was all a blur.

But the one thing I knew for sure was that I wanted to be with her.

I let out a sigh and put the mirror down.

I brushed my fingers over the mark she left on my neck.

"Miyagi."

"What?"

She turned toward me, not looking the slightest bit guilty.

I could hardly believe just how fast I was ready to forgive her.

I held my head and let out a clear sigh.

"Let's keep watching the movie."

I said as I turned the tablet back on.

What I Want To Be Certain of With Miyagi (III)

Part 132

In the middle of the night, I looked at the mark Miyagi had left on me.

The red color stood out clearly in the mirror.

There was no way a mark that fresh would be gone by morning.

I set the hand mirror down on the table and leaned back against my bed.

I could try covering it with concealer or foundation if I really wanted to. But there wasn't any point if I was going to stay home anyway.

"… I guess I have no choice but to stay at home, huh. How boring."

It wasn't like I had anything in particular I wanted to do at home, but the idea of going out while constantly worrying about the mark Miyagi left just wasn't worth the hassle.

I hadn't made any plans to meet up with friends either.

I had thought about maybe going somewhere with them, but there wasn't anywhere I especially wanted or needed to go. And once the break was over, I'd be seeing them at university whether I liked it or not anyway.

There was nothing wrong with just lounging around at home.

But the more I thought about what Miyagi had done, the more restless I felt.

Even back in high school, it always felt like I was the one getting treated the worst.

Like when she left a hickey on my arm just to see if lemon juice would make it fade faster.

Or when she unbuttoned my rain-soaked uniform and left a mark on my chest.

Miyagi was always doing sketchy things like that.

And yet, I'd still chosen to live with her.

If someone had told me last year this would be my reality, I wouldn't have believed them.

I pressed my palm over the mark she'd left.

Miyagi never seemed like the type to go easy on people, but she had held back at first. Nowadays, she didn't hesitate at all.

I peeled my back away from the bed and hugged my knees.

My eyes drifted to the platypus peeking out from under the table.

The tissue box, with tissues sprouting from its back, was supposed to be shared between us—though it still felt like it was Miyagi's. And probably because it resembled the crocodile tissue box in her room, I didn't mind having the platypus in mine.

Back then, all of her stuff piling up in my space had felt like a burden. But now, both her school uniform and the shirt tucked away in my drawers felt like they belonged here.

I stood up and picked up an accessory case off the top of my dresser.

Setting it down on the table, I opened it and took out the pendant Miyagi had given me.

I hadn't worn it since the day it was handed to me in exchange for that envelope on our graduation day.

I wanted to touch her again, the way I had during the days I still wore this pendant.

I wished I'd kissed her while she was watching the movie.

I laid the silver chain across my fingers.

I looked at the small crescent moon-shaped charm in my hand.

I traced the chain with my fingertips, then curled the charm into my palm.

I didn't want to go back to those days, but I couldn't help envying the me from back then.

I pulled the platypus closer and set the pendant gently on top of its head.

Then I laid down on my bed and tapped the wall with my fingers.

There wasn't a response—not that I'd made much noise at all—but I heard something from the other side.

It was dead quiet in the middle of the night, so I didn't have to strain my ears to hear the soft creak of a door opening.

I got out of bed.

I wasn't sure whether I should go out into our shared space or not.

It wasn't like I had anything to talk to her about.

But after thinking about it for a moment, I stood up anyway.

I was glad I'd thought to buy a set of sweats—not having to worry about what I was wearing made it easier to step out.

When I opened the door, I saw the light on.

Miyagi was standing in front of the fridge.

She was wearing a sweatshirt I recognized—the same one I'd borrowed from her during winter break when I stayed over at her place.

"You're not going to sleep?"

I asked as I stood near the table.

"I was going to sleep, but I just got thirsty."

She pulled a soda bottle out of the fridge, poured it into a cup, and drank about a third of it.

"What about you, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi asked, holding the cup in her hand.

"I thought I'd get something to drink too."

I replied, using that as my excuse for coming out into our shared space.

"Should I grab you the orange juice?"

"Hmm, I'll just take some of what you're having. Can I have a sip?"

"But it's soda."

"Yeah, I can tell."

"… You can have the rest, then."

She walked over to me and handed me the cup.

"I don't really need this much."

I wasn't actually thirsty, and I didn't like carbonated drinks either. I didn't want to be forced to drink most of it just because of the excuse I'd made up.

Still, I took a sip like I said I would. When I tried to give the cup back, Miyagi wouldn't take it.

So I reluctantly drank about half and placed it on the table.

"Sendai-san."

Miyagi spoke.

"Are you going out tomorrow?"

"Well, you know, thanks to a certain someone, I can't even if I

wanted to."

"Hm."

Even though she was the one who asked, she seemed completely disinterested in what I said as she finished off the rest of the soda. Then she said she'd wash the cup and stood up.

"How about we chat a bit more?"

I said, grabbing her arm.

"What is there to even talk about?"

"We can just talk about anything, can't we?"

I said, taking the cup from her and setting it on the table.

I took a step toward Miyagi.

I reached out and touched her lips with my fingertips.

"What happened to talking?"

Miyagi frowned. Her face made it clear she was in a bad mood, but she didn't try to leave, so I let go of her arm.

"Come up with something to talk about, then."

"You're the one who said you wanted to talk, Sendai-san."

"Oh, was I?"

I ran my hand along her cheek and pressed my palm against it.

She had to know what I was trying to do, and part of me thought I should back off while I still had the chance.

But my mind wandered back to high school—after the cultural festival, when I'd called her to the music preparation room.

That day, she'd been having fun without me, so I'd grabbed her arm and told her if she didn't want to be kissed, she should leave.

I hadn't really meant to kiss her back then—but I'd wanted to, and I did.

This wasn't the exact same situation, but it felt similar.

I leaned in closer toward Miyagi.

She said nothing, but she didn't close her eyes either, so I closed my own.

And then, our lips met.

Her lips felt so familiar—so soft, and so warm.

But maybe because it had been so long, my heart thudded so loudly it felt like it might break.

My head went blank.

Our lips had barely touched, but it already felt like it was getting too hard to breathe, so I pulled away.

Then I kissed her again.

This time, I pressed my lips against hers even harder. I grabbed onto her arm, but when I tried to pull her closer, she shook my hand off and shoved me away by my shoulders.

It wasn't enough.

I wanted to kiss her more.

I grabbed her hand.

But she shook me off again—and this time, she kicked me in the leg as well.

"Why didn't you run away?"

Miyagi never ran away when I wanted her to. Even though I'd expected her to, she just accepted it. If she had walked away before I kissed her, maybe I wouldn't have ended up feeling like this—like I wanted more.

"… I was just testing you to see if you were a liar, Sendai-san. So you are a liar after all. When we agreed to watch a movie, you promised not to do anything weird."

"I meant I wouldn't do anything weird in my room."

"That's what I don't like about you, Sendai-san."

She said bitterly, then kicked me just above the ankle—harder this time.

"That hurt."

She was clearly holding back, but it still hurt. When I complained, she kicked me in the same spot again.

"I'm going back to my room."

Miyagi turned her back and started walking away.

As she took three steps toward her door, I called out to her from behind.

"What are you doing tomorrow, Miyagi?"

"I'm hanging out with Maika."

She answered without looking back.

"The weather forecast said it was going to rain tomorrow."

"You're such a liar, Sendai-san. When I checked just a little while ago, it said it'd be sunny."

Miyagi turned around and refuted the fake weather report I'd given her.

"Huh. Maybe I misremembered. Are you free the day after tomorrow?"

"… I am."

"I can't go anywhere with this thing on my neck, so let's watch another movie together."

I said, smiling as I touched my neck.

It wasn't fair that I was the only one stuck inside. Since she was the reason I couldn't go out, the least she could do was keep me company.

I wasn't expecting her to make it fun or anything—I just wanted her to stay with me.

"As long as we're not watching anything you like, Sendai-san."

"That's fine."

I said with a smile, and Miyagi replied with, "Good night," in the most annoyed voice I'd heard from her all day.

Chapter 43

What I Don't Want Sendai-san to See (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 133

Nothing about Sendai-san had changed at all.

Even after kissing me—she spoke to me yesterday, this morning, and after lunch in the same voice, with the same expression, like nothing had happened.

Of course, nothing about me had changed either.

All we did was something we'd already done plenty of times before. It had just been a while since the last time.

I'd never truly hated anything Sendai-san had done to me, and that included this time too. Besides, I hadn't stopped her, so it wasn't like I had any reason to punish her.

But what did bother me was how she could break a promise and still act like nothing had changed.

Even though she was the one who asked me to be her roommate.

We'd promised to watch another movie together, but I couldn't help worrying she'd go back on her word about "not doing anything weird" again.

I brushed a hand against my ear.

My fingers lightly touched my earring.

I could make her swear on these earrings not to break her promise again—but I didn't really want to show her my ears.

I set a mirror on the table and pushed my hair behind one ear.

My earrings reflected clearly in the small, standing mirror.

I'd heard it would take about a month for a piercing to heal.

Until then, I wasn't supposed to take them out.

It wasn't like I wanted to run out and buy new ones, but ever since Sendai-san started saying things like "they suit you" and "they look cute on you," I'd been way more conscious of them.

So much that it made me want to hide them from her.

She was always saying things she didn't need to say.

I moved my hair back to where it had been and glanced at the clock.

The time we'd agreed on was getting close.

As I was about to put the mirror away, my eyes drifted to my lips.

I remembered the warmth of her hand on my cheek the day before yesterday—the way her eyes had stayed open, how serious they looked, and how soft her lips were when they touched mine.

I traced my lips lightly with my fingertips.

I'd touched them like this not too long ago.

That day when she wanted to put makeup on my lips, I ended up wiping hers instead. Then I found myself in front of a mirror—just like I was now.

My eyes landed on my reflection.

Before I knew it, my fingers were on my lips again, and I instinctively covered the mirror with my palm.

"Ah."

The glass was cold against my skin, and I immediately regretted touching it.

When I pulled my hand away, my fingerprints were left smudged across the surface.

"Ugh… This is all your fault, Sendai-san."

I stood up and left the room.

Outside her door, I took a breath to steady myself, then knocked twice.

From inside, I heard her voice say, “Come in.”

I exhaled again and opened the door.

"Oh, you’re actually here."

Sendai-san said, sounding a little surprised as she leaned back against her bed.

"If you don’t want me here, I’ll just go back to my room."

I knew she didn’t mean it like that, but still, I turned my back to her.

Before I could close the door, she called out to me.

"Hey, come inside."

Her voice was oddly gentle.

When I turned around, she was standing now. Her soft, light-colored skirt fluttered a little.

She’d been wearing skirts a lot lately.

It wasn’t the same as our high school uniform, but it still reminded me of how she used to look.

I always wore jeans, out of habit. After we moved in together, she’d asked me to wear a skirt once—but never brought it up again. She was always saying things on a whim that were hard for me to deal with.

"I just didn’t think you’d really come to my room… Even after I did something like that, you didn’t leave. You still came to see me, huh?"

She grabbed my arm as she rambled on about things I didn't understand, and pulled me into her room.

"Leave? What are you talking about?"

"It's fine if you don't get it."

She smiled, saying something vague.

When I tried to ask what she meant, she dodged it and changed the subject.

"I'm okay with watching anything you like, Miyagi," she said, handing me her tablet.

I didn't have much of a choice, so I sat next to her.

One side of my body started tingling.

I couldn't calm down.

It felt like electricity was crawling through my shoulder and arm just from being next to her.

I could practically feel my blood moving under my skin, so I scooted away a little.

"I'll punish you if you touch me."

I said as I placed the platypus-shaped tissue box between us.

As I stared down at the tablet, trying to pick a movie, I heard her oddly cheerful voice right beside me.

"You know that whatever punishment you come up with might not actually feel like a punishment to me, right?"

"What do you mean by that?"

I looked up from the tablet and turned my attention to Sendai-san.

"Just giving you a little heads-up. Depending on what it is, I might end up enjoying it."

"I have no intention of making your punishment fun for you, Sendai-san."

"So that means you're planning to come up with something that isn't fun for me on purpose?"

"Exactly."

I said flatly, and Sendai-san started tapping the platypus tissue box on its head.

"But what if the thing you think isn't fun actually is fun for me?"

Was she just trying to talk me out of punishing her?

Or was she hinting at something else?

Either way, if what I thought was unpleasant ended up being enjoyable for Sendai-san, that would be a problem.

She'd gone along with things that most people would have flat-out refused. She hadn't disobeyed me when I blindfolded her, and she hadn't refused when I told her to lick my feet. If she was being serious about finding these kinds of punishments fun, I honestly wouldn't be surprised.

"You're such a pervert, Sendai-san."

"Hey, I haven't said or done anything that makes me sound like a pervert."

"But you're definitely thinking about something perverted, aren't you?"

She was the kind of person who could suddenly say something like she wanted to kiss me, and even if I said no, she'd go ahead and do it anyway—just like she did that night. So if she was thinking about something more than that, it wouldn't shock me in the slightest.

"I'm not thinking about anything perverted."

Sendai-san replied, wearing a confident smile.

If only I could actually see what was going on inside her head.

I found it hard to believe her when she said that with a face like that.

"That's definitely a lie. You're an erotic demon, Sendai-san."

"Come on, don't make it sound like that's all I ever think about. Besides, if you're convinced I'm having perverted thoughts, doesn't that say something about you too? You must be thinking about that stuff if that's where your mind goes."

"Nope. I don't think about stuff like that. You're the only pervert here, Sendai-san. A complete lecher."

I set the tablet down on the floor and grabbed the platypus tissue box, then smacked Sendai-san's arm with it—twice, and not gently either.

Sendai-san laughed.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. It was just a joke. Come on, pick a movie already."

She said as she handed the tablet back to me.

I glared at her, then started scrolling through the list of movie titles.

Last time, I picked one that Sendai-san got bored of halfway through, which had been a pain to deal with. So this time, I wanted to pick something that would keep her attention until the end. But I also didn't want to go with horror, even though she seemed way too eager for it.

A few ideas came to mind.

I mentioned the title of an anime film that had been aired on TV many times before, one that was popular with both kids and adults.

"Have you seen it before?"

I asked.

"Nope, but you have, right, Miyagi?"

"Yeah, I have. But it’s a movie I really like."

I searched for it and pressed play.

I was incredibly conscious of Sendai-san sitting next to me.

The same tingling sensation from before ran through my shoulder and arm.

Just like last time, Sendai-san moved the platypus from between us onto her bed.

"Pay attention to the movie."

I said, shifting slightly away from her, but for some reason, she moved closer anyway.

I smacked her arm and told her, “Watch the movie,” but instead, she reached out and grabbed my hand.

Her grip was gentle—it didn’t hurt—but my arm still reacted like it had been shocked.

I reflexively tried to pull away, but she held on tight.

"Don’t worry, I am watching."

Her voice made it hard to tell if she was serious or not.

"But if you don’t like it, I’ll let go."

She added, softly.

Well… if she’s just holding my hand…

I guess I could let that much slide.

I didn’t squeeze back, but I let her hand stay where it was, and turned my attention back to the tablet.

What I Don't Want Sendai-san to See (II)

Part 134

Soon after the climax, the credits began to roll.

Sendai-san was still staring at the screen.

She'd tried talking quite a bit during the movie too, but unlike last time, she only commented on things related to the film.

If there was a problem, it was that the space between us had nearly disappeared.

At some point, Sendai-san had shifted closer—so close our shoulders were almost touching.

We hadn't started the movie sitting like this.

There was supposed to be more space between us.

"I don't watch anime all that much, but that was actually pretty good."

She tapped me on the shoulder as she spoke, and I became sharply aware of where our arms were brushing.

Sendai-san really had a strange sense of distance.

There was no reason for her to sit this close just to tell me what she thought of the movie. I wished she'd move away a little.

"I'm glad to hear that. But… how long are we going to stay like this?"

I asked, lifting our still-joined hands.

"Until you tell me to let go, Miyagi."

"Then let go already."

But instead of letting go, she tightened her grip—to the point it was starting to hurt.

"Sendai-san. Let go."

"Do you hate it that much when I touch you?"

She moved her arm away slightly, but still didn't let go of my hand. She just loosened her hold a bit.

"Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?"

"It's just… if you don't like it, I want to know why."

"Don't you hate it when I touch you, Sendai-san?"

I didn't answer her question. I asked one of my own instead.

Sendai-san turned toward me with a smile.

"Do I look like I hate it?"

"… No."

"Then it's your turn to answer."

She gave my hand a slight squeeze, like she was pushing me to respond.

It didn't hurt, but the air in the room made it feel like I wasn't allowed to stay silent.

"I don't hate it, but…"

I had no choice but to say something.

"But?"

"I don't hate it, but I still want you to let go of my hand right now."

I didn't mind being touched by her, and holding hands wasn't a problem in itself.

But staying like this for too long was making me feel uneasy.

During the movie, it was easy to ignore because I was focused on the screen, but now that it was over, I wanted her to let go.

Still, our hands remained together.

And it left me feeling unsettled, like something was quietly shifting inside me.

"Sendai-san."

I said her name with a hint of protest.

"Okay, okay."

She let go, sounding a little defeated.

I opened my hand.

Even after clenching and stretching it a few times, it didn't feel like mine.

It felt like it belonged to someone else.

As I stared down at my palm, Sendai-san spoke.

"Well, now that we're done with the movie, want to do anything else? It's still kind of early for dinner."

"I'm going back to my room."

I stood up, but she grabbed the hem of my shirt.

"Wait. Stay a little longer."

She tugged harder, stretching the fabric.

I could've stood anyway, but I didn't want the hem to get stretched out, so I sat back down and gave her a complaint.

"Let go of me."

"Didn't you say earlier you'd punish me if I touched you? Shouldn't you follow through on that?"

"I’m not going to punish you. Let go."

"You’re the one who ruined my Golden Week, you know?"

Sendai-san let go of my shirt and pointed at her neck.

Right where her fingertip landed was the red mark I’d left.

I’d seen it yesterday too. It had already started to fade, but even now, it hadn’t disappeared completely.

"Can’t you hang out with me just a little longer?"

She said, with an annoying smile on her face.

"… What do you want to do?"

"Hmm… let me think. How about I do your makeup for you?"

"No."

"Oh, come on. I’ll make you look cute. I’ll even do your hair so your earrings show better."

Sendai-san said as she reached out to touch my hair.

She tried to tuck it behind my ear, so I swatted her hand away.

"I said no. And don’t touch my hair."

My voice came out louder than I expected—even I was caught off guard.

Sendai-san froze with the same smile still stuck on her face. I followed up quickly.

"… Sorry."

It wasn’t that I didn’t want her touching my hair.

I just didn’t want her to see my earrings.

But I didn’t want to tell her that.

The air in the room felt frozen, and I didn't know how to break it.

I started to get up, but Sendai-san spoke in a cheery voice.

"I won't touch your hair. But can I at least put some makeup on you? Just a little?"

I knew she was just trying to be considerate, which made it harder to say no.

But I still didn't want her to put makeup on me.

Hugging my knees, I tried to meet her halfway.

"Can't we do something else?"

"Hmm… then how about I dress you up?"

"As in, you want me to try on your clothes?"

"Yep. I'll find something that'll look good on you and have you wear it."

"Why do you only ever suggest weird things?"

I didn't want to keep rejecting every idea she had, but everything she suggested was hard to agree with.

I wished she'd suggest something more normal.

"I'm also fine doing whatever you want, Miyagi. Got anything in mind?"

"… Not really."

"Then let's go with my idea. Which do you prefer—getting your makeup done or dressing up?"

I didn't want to be her doll, but it didn't seem like I had the option to refuse either.

I tried to think of other things we could do, just to give me more options to work with.

But I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do with her here in her room.

If I were with Maika, we could just keep chatting about nothing in particular and pass the time.

But when it came to Sendai-san, I never knew what to do in situations like this.

What I did know was that I didn't want her seeing me in makeup or wearing her clothes. Whichever I picked, she was definitely going to say something about me, and I didn't want that.

"If you're not going to pick, I'll just decide for you."

"… If I have to choose, I'll go with trying on your clothes."

If I let her do my makeup, she'd be touching my face and probably moving my hair. And if she did that, it'd be no surprise if she touched my ears too.

Thinking about that, I figured it'd be better to just put on some of her clothes.

But that didn't mean I wanted to be her dress-up doll.

Our tastes in fashion were different. And when it came to skirts or pants, I wasn't even sure they'd fit. If I couldn't zip them up, that'd be a nightmare. We looked different too, so I didn't think her clothes would suit me.

"Okay, let's go with that then. Turn this way, Miyagi."

Sendai-san tugged on my arms, which were still wrapped around my knees.

"It doesn't matter which way I'm facing. Just give me the clothes you want me to try on."

"Come on, just turn to face me first."

She pulled harder, and I reluctantly turned toward her.

"Alright, now take off your clothes."

Sendai-san said casually as she grabbed the hem of my shirt and started lifting it.

"Hey, wait!"

I panicked and swatted her hand away.

"Hm?"

"What do you mean, ‘hm’? I can undress myself just fine, so wait outside. Actually, before that, give me the clothes first."

"I’ll give them to you after you’ve taken yours off. Also, why are you kicking me out? This is my room, you know?"

Even though she was clearly in the wrong, Sendai-san looked at me like I was being unreasonable.

Sure, this was her room, but that didn’t change the fact that what she was doing was weird.

Normally, she should be handing me the clothes first before expecting me to undress.

"So what? Just give me the clothes first."

I held out my hand expectantly.

But instead of grabbing clothes, she moved closer and slid her hand under my shirt, her palm grazing along my side.

Her fingers wandered up toward my ribs.

It tickled, so I pressed my hand over hers through the fabric to stop her.

"You really are only ever thinking about erotic things, aren’t you, Sendai-san?"

"I’m not thinking of anything erotic. Come on, take off your clothes. How else are you going to put mine on?"

"I’m not changing in front of you. Wait outside until I’m done. And seriously, give me the clothes already."

"Nope. If you’re not going to change in front of me, let me do your makeup instead. You won’t even need to take your clothes off for that, right?"

Everything had already been decided from the beginning.

Sendai-san always did this—offering choices that weren’t really choices at all.

"You’re so annoying, Sendai-san."

I glared at her, still too close for comfort.

Her hand slipped out from under my shirt.

"Let me ask you again. Makeup, or clothes?"

"… Do whatever you want, Sendai-san."

"Okay, then makeup it is."

She went to get a fairly large makeup case and brought it over.

Then, she sat back down in front of me with a cheerful voice.

"I’ll try not to touch your hair."

What I Don't Want Sendai-san to See (III)

Part 135

I wasn't enjoying this at all.

The first thing that ended up being touched was my hair, which wasn't supposed to be touched in the first place. Since it was in the way, Sendai-san pulled out a headband and smiled as she swept up my bangs and tucked my hair behind my ears, revealing my earrings.

I knew my hair would get in the way when she started putting makeup on, so I had expected this. I could've said no and left her room before any of this happened, but I didn't, so this was just the consequence of my own actions. I knew that, but even so, I furrowed my brows.

"I've always wanted to try doing your makeup at least once, you know?"

Sendai-san sounded cheerful. Unlike me, she was in a good mood.

"Okay, let's start with applying primer."

She pulled a small container out of her makeup case and spread a cream-like substance over my forehead and nose.

It went without saying that makeup couldn't be applied without touching my face, but even so, I felt she was too close. Our eyes didn't meet, though. She had a serious look on her face as she worked, spreading the primer across my skin.

I couldn't relax.

Not knowing where to look, I closed my eyes. As if she'd been waiting for that, she applied primer to the area around my eyes too.

"Now, we move onto putting on foundation."

I didn't know why she was narrating her every step, but I heard her

rummaging through the case and pulling something else out. Then, she started patting foundation onto my face.

It felt like I was turning into a sheet of drawing paper.

Sure, they had fancy names like “primer” and “foundation”, but it still just felt like I was getting my face painted.

All I had to do was sit there and keep quiet, which wasn’t that difficult, but it was dull. I wasn’t allowed to talk, and whenever I tried to touch my face out of curiosity, she told me not to. With nothing to do, the boredom weighed on me. Still, after a while, her hands finally stopped, and I opened my eyes.

"That’s enough, isn’t it?"

I looked straight at Sendai-san. She was staring at me with a serious expression.

"We’re just getting started. What we’ve done so far was only preparation."

"I’m tired of this already. Just sitting here and doing nothing is boring."

I grabbed her hand before she could pull something else from the case.

"Just bear with it a little longer."

"I don’t want to."

"Don’t say that. Give me ten more minutes."

"I’ll give you five."

Sendai-san let out a small groan as I released her hand. She stared at my face, then pulled something out of the case and told me to close my eyes, then open them, over and over. After feeling around my eyes and eyebrows, five minutes passed.

"Come on. Isn’t this enough already?"

"Five minutes wasn’t enough. I’m not finished yet."

She sounded frustrated.

"But you promised only five minutes."

"Okay, fine. Let me just put on some blush and lip balm. Then we'll be done."

I hadn't agreed to anything, but she placed what looked like blush and lip balm on the table anyway.

It wasn't worth the energy to argue. Even if I got up and went back to my room, my face had already been turned into a used canvas.

"Fine. Promise me you'll stop after those two."

I hadn't asked her to swear on my earrings, but she glanced at them before replying with a simple, "Got it." Then she picked up a brush, bigger than the ones used in art class, and began dusting blush over my cheeks.

Right now, it felt like she was drawing a new face on top of mine. The way she applied it seemed like a technique you'd learn in an art class, and I'd never been any good at that. My grades in art had always been low.

"I'll apply the lip balm on you directly."

Sendai-san said.

But instead of the balm, I felt her fingertip touch my lips. Slowly, she traced them from one corner to the other.

She moved slowly and gently.

She'd done this before—many times.

But Sendai-san wasn't the kind of person who would touch my lips without a reason.

My chest tightened, and I pushed her arm away.

"Didn't you say you were going to use the lip balm?"

She quietly took her finger away, and in its place, she pressed the lip balm against my lips.

My eyebrows twitched.

I'd never liked lip balm. The sticky texture always bothered me, so I only ever used it when my lips were really dry. Right now, I just wanted to wipe it off. I wanted to swat her hand away, but instead, I clenched my fists and endured it.

I didn't want the balm to smear onto my hands, and I didn't want to touch anything with it afterward.

As my nails dug into my palms and my hands began to ache, Sendai-san finally pulled the lip balm away.

"Okay, we're done now. You can take that off too,"

Sendai-san said, pointing at the headband.

I did as I was told and slipped it off. Then, she handed me a mirror.

"So, what do you think?"

At her prompting, I looked into the mirror.

I knew the face reflected back was mine, but somehow, it felt like I was looking at someone else entirely.

When my gaze dropped to my lips, I noticed they were now the same color as Sendai-san's.

It didn't suit me. Even though it was the same shade she always wore, it looked completely different on me.

I knew I wasn't supposed to touch it, but I still brushed my fingertips against my lips.

They felt stickier than usual.

Whenever I kissed Sendai-san while she had lip balm on, I never really minded the texture. So I didn't understand why I found it so unpleasant when it was on my lips.

"Come on, let me hear your thoughts, Miyagi."

Sendai-san urged, and I looked over at her.

"… My complexion looks better."

"Well, yeah, there's that too. But I want you to admit that you look cuter now."

"I feel like I look weird."

"You don't look weird at all. I put makeup on you to make you cuter—so of course you look cuter now."

"It doesn't really suit me, though."

"You look cute. Seriously."

Just like I thought, Sendai-san kept saying things that sounded like teasing. If she was actually serious, then she probably needed to get her eyes checked. And if her eyes were fine, then she should've just kept her mouth shut. I wasn't used to hearing those kinds of needless comments, and having them thrown at me over and over sent chills down my spine.

"Do you want me to teach you how to put your own makeup on?"

I handed the mirror back to her.

"No, I'm fine. I'm not going to wear makeup anyway."

"If you don't want to do it yourself, I can always do it for you."

"I don't need you to do that. You're satisfied now, right? I'm going to take it off."

"Wait. Since you're already wearing makeup, why don't we go out for dinner today?"

"I don't want to. Besides, I already told you—I'm not going anywhere with you during Golden Week. And anyway, what would you do about this?"

I said, touching her neck.

The mark I'd left hadn't faded completely.

"… I forgot about that."

"It's still pretty obvious."

That wasn't exactly true. It wasn't as noticeable as I made it sound.

If she wanted to hide it, she probably could without much trouble. Still, the idea of her covering it up before going out left a bad taste in my mouth. I didn't want her saying she'd hide it, and I didn't want her actually doing it either. If anything, I hoped it wouldn't disappear even after the break ended.

"I guess we shouldn't go, then."

With a sigh, Sendai-san leaned back against the bed. She touched her neck, even though there was no way to check for the mark just by feeling around.

Her fingers covered the red spot, so I reached out and grabbed her hand.

"What is it?"

She looked at me, surprised.

"Don't move."

"Is that an order?"

"No. But I listened to you today and let you put makeup on me, so now you should listen to me too."

I met her gaze as she continued leaning against the bed.

I pulled her hand away, and the mark came back into view.

She didn't resist.

I ran my fingertip along her lips.

I didn't mind the way the lip balm felt on her mouth as much as I

did on mine. I'd never hated it when she kissed me.

My finger slid from her lips to her chin, then moved down to the mark on her neck.

I hadn't given her an order to stay still, but Sendai-san didn't try to stop me. I leaned in, bringing my face close to her neck. My lips brushed lightly over the mark, and I felt her throat shift as she spoke.

"The break's almost over, you know?"

"I know."

That was why I wasn't going to leave a mark where it would be visible.

I undid one of the buttons on her blouse.

Then I pressed my lips just above her collarbone, in the space between her neck and her shoulder, and sucked hard.

Through the skin beneath my mouth, I felt the heat of her body—warmer than usual.

"Miyagi, you're going to leave another mark."

Sendai-san tapped me lightly on the shoulder, and I pulled away.

This one wasn't as red as the last, and it was in a spot that was easier to hide, so there shouldn't be a problem.

But maybe the mark not being visible was the problem.

"You said you didn't hate it when I touched you, right, Sendai-san?"

"Yeah, but isn't this a little past just 'touching'?"

"Don't sweat the little details, Sendai-san."

I buried my face in her neck and lightly bit down where I'd just left the mark. Then I ran my tongue over the spot.

Out of all the days we'd lived together, this was the closest I'd ever

been to her.

She smelled really nice.

Even if I used the same shampoo, I doubted I'd smell like her. Even if we wore the same makeup, we looked nothing alike. She was smarter, prettier.

No matter how much I copied her, we'd never be the same.

I sank my teeth back into her skin. As I bit down harder, I could feel her skin give beneath my teeth.

We were different, but doing this made me feel closer to her. Then I heard Sendai-san say it hurt, so I stopped. I licked the faint marks I'd left behind, then trailed my lips up to just under her ear.

She grabbed me by the arm.

"Is this supposed to be a punishment?"

Sendai-san asked, as if the thought had just occurred to her.

"No, it's not."

"Then what are you doing?"

It wasn't an order.

It wasn't a punishment either.

All I wanted was to leave a mark that wouldn't disappear—something like a piercing. But since she wouldn't let me pierce her ears, this was all I could do.

"Does it matter?"

Now that university had started and she was about to become a part-time tutor, there were more and more parts of Sendai-san I didn't know.

I wanted to put myself somewhere in the middle of those unknowns.

And I felt like it was okay for me to leave at least a small mark on

her.

"It does. Why are you doing this?"

Sendai-san asked, pressing for an answer even though she'd usually let it go by now.

But no matter how many times she asked, I didn't want to tell her.

It was because she was going to be doing things I wouldn't know about, in places I didn't know.

There was no way I could say that out loud. Even if I told her the truth, she'd probably say that wasn't a good enough reason to leave a mark on her.

I pressed my tongue against her neck again.

Her skin felt warmer than usual.

I moved my mouth back to just beneath her ear and sucked gently. I wasn't sure if I left a mark, but I licked her earlobe anyway and pressed my lips to it.

It was cooler than her neck.

It felt nice.

"Hey, Miyagi. Things might get a little dangerous if you keep this up."

She said, gripping my arm tightly.

Still, I kept licking her earlobe, and then bit down softly.

She pulled me closer, wrapping her arms around my back.

"Don't do that."

I tried to push her off, but her voice came right next to my ear.

"You were going to keep going, weren't you? Then let me do a little of what I want, too."

"Let go of me."

Her arms only tightened.

"I won't do it again, so let go."

I pushed her harder this time, and finally managed to slip out of her arms.

"Miyagi, you really shouldn't do stuff like that so easily."

Sendai-san said, touching just above her collarbone.

"I don't want to hear that from you, Sendai-san."

I wasn't the only one who touched others without permission.

Sendai-san touched me too—and would even kiss me. Considering that, she had no right to complain, no matter what I did.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san called out to me and let out a sigh.

"What?"

"Do you want to go out for dinner sometime?"

I hadn't expected her to ask that, and to my own surprise, I answered with, "Sure," before I could even stop myself.

I didn't mind going. But it annoyed me how easily she pulled that answer out of me.

"Okay, it's a promise, then."

Sendai-san said, grabbing my arm before I could even start to complain.

The distance between us disappeared in an instant, and her lips brushed against my ear, over my hair.

Then, she kissed my earring.

"How can you just do that so easily?"

"It’s basically like a pinky promise."

"Then why didn’t we just use our pinkies?"

"You’re the one who said your earrings are supposed to help us remember our promises, right? So it’s fine, isn’t it? If I don’t swear on them properly, we might forget our promise."

Sendai-san spoke like it was the most natural thing in the world. But I realized something wasn’t right.

"Wait. That’s not how it works. These earrings are for you to remember the promises I make—not for me to remember the promises you make."

"Don’t sweat the small stuff, Miyagi."

She said as she fastened the buttons I had undone earlier.

Volume 5 Interlude

Greeting Miyagi With a "Welcome Home"

(Sendai PoV)

Part 135-extra

I carried a convenience store bag in one hand and a brand-new key in the other.

Sliding it into the lock, I opened the door and stepped inside.

"I'm home."

My voice echoed through the empty apartment, unanswered. Of course, there was no one here to reply, but that simple fact filled me with quiet joy. So I said it again, just to savor the sound.

Back in high school, I'd lived in a house full of people who never answered when I came through the door. I'd long since stopped expecting a reply, but each silence felt like something was being chipped away from me. The memories I cherished with my parents and older sister were still there, but over time, every unanswered "I'm home" made them harder to hold onto.

Here, though, things were different.

This new apartment—this space I'd chosen for myself—held no one who could hurt me like that. Hearing my own words echo back felt wonderful in a way I hadn't imagined. Moving out had been the right choice, and from the bottom of my heart, I was glad I'd come here.

Since moving in, I must have said "I'm home" countless times already, but I never got tired of it. I wanted to keep saying it, over and over, enjoying every moment in this quiet place that belonged only to me.

But soon—around two o'clock—this apartment would no longer be mine alone. Miyagi would be moving in, and the thought of sharing

this space with her filled me with a happiness even greater than the freedom of leaving my family behind. I'd been waiting for this day for a long time.

"I'm home."

I mumbled again under my breath as I took off my shoes. The entryway was smaller than the one back at my family's house, but somehow it felt like it fit me better. I walked down the short hallway and into the living room and kitchen. From the convenience store bag, I put away the soda and barley tea in the fridge, then set a sandwich, some orange juice, and my bag on the table. I sat down, letting my eyes wander over the room.

All the furniture and appliances here were picked out by me, bought with money from my parents. I chose everything by weighing price against design, compromising when I had to, but I thought I'd done a decent job. Truthfully, I wanted to choose it all with Miyagi, but she brushed it off and told me to handle it.

That was just like her.

I took a bite of the sandwich. I wasn't hungry, but I kept eating anyway. When I finished, I washed it down with some orange juice. Just then, my phone buzzed.

It was Umina.

"Can I stay over at your place during summer break?"

Ever since I'd moved here, she'd been sending me messages like that. Wanting to visit, wanting to hang out during Golden Week. My phone was full of those little attempts to tie my high school self to the person I was now. But none of it stirred anything in me. Still, I wasn't cold-hearted enough to cut her off, so like always, I channeled my high school self and replied:

"I have a roommate, so that'd be a little complicated."

I set my phone back on the table.

What I wanted wasn't a message from Umina, or the occasional one from Mariko. What I wanted was to hear from Miyagi, who almost never reached out after we graduated.

Of course, that wish went unanswered. It always did. Miyagi only contacted me when she needed something.

I let my head sink onto the table.

Speaking of people who didn't need anything from me, my sister had sent me a single message too.

I sighed.

She'd sent a pointless message saying, "Did you finish moving in?" and I'd replied with a simple yes. That was it. We'd barely spoken in ages, so I had no idea why she even bothered, and I didn't care enough to find out.

I sat back up, drained the last of my orange juice, and tossed the trash away. Then, I opened my contacts on my phone and brought up Miyagi's name, trying to push away everything else.

"Are you sure you don't need me to come pick you up?」

I'd already asked her once and gotten a no, but I couldn't stop myself from sending it again. Of course, unlike Umina or Mariko, she didn't reply right away. After five or ten minutes, a short message finally appeared on my screen: "I'm fine by myself."

I wasn't exactly happy with that answer, but it was so typical of Miyagi. Still, just knowing she'd replied at all was enough to make me feel better.

"I guess I have no choice but to wait for her."

I put my phone back down on the table and stood up.

There were two bedrooms right in front of me—one already mine, and the other reserved for Miyagi. She'd said whoever moved in first could choose their room, so I did. Not that it mattered much; the rooms were basically the same size with nearly identical layouts. The only thing that mattered was making it clear which one belonged to which of us.

I opened the door to my room.

My room still felt unfamiliar to me. It was filled with new furniture I wasn't used to: a small bookshelf, a set of drawers, and a bed with comforters cheaper than the one I'd had before. Everything was simple, but the bed was different.

It was the one thing I'd bought entirely with my own money.

I'd decided to let myself stay under my parents' care for the next four years, so I wasn't paying my living expenses out of pocket. That also meant I hadn't completely cut ties with them either. But at the very least, I wanted something of my own to sleep on.

I had no plans to go back to the house my family lived in. Buying this bed was my way of renewing that resolve, and a way to feel like I was finally living as myself.

I walked around the room once before sitting down on the mattress.

There were a few things I'd brought from home—my books, my clothes, my mirror. But one important thing was missing.

□ A piggy bank that could hold up to one million yen.

It had been in my old room ever since I bought it in my first year of high school, but it doesn't exist anymore. Since there wasn't any way to take money out of it, I had to break it open with a can opener when it came time to sign the contract for this apartment, and from the moment I did, it stopped serving any purpose.

But in its place, I was gaining something far more important—a new roommate.

"This almost feels like a lie."

On the day we graduated, I had already signed the contract for this apartment and offered Miyagi an envelope with the invitation to move in. At the time, I honestly didn't believe she would accept. I'd been pushy, maybe too pushy, and it felt only natural that she would turn me down.

I stood up and paced around my room once more. The thought of Miyagi becoming my roommate starting today made me strangely restless.

I paused briefly, then circled around again like a caged animal, before finally heading back out to the shared living area.

I wasn't usually this nervous, but when it came to Miyagi, I could never seem to act like myself.

My phone sat silent on the table. No new messages.

I turned to look at the two bedroom doors standing side by side in the hallway.

I knocked gently on the one that would be hers.

There was no reply, of course.

Still, I opened the door and peeked inside.

The room was bare, with no furniture and no boxes yet. It didn't feel like hers at all.

"I wonder what Miyagi's going to bring with her."

I could easily recall her old room—I had visited often enough, once or twice a week, sometimes more. Bookshelves lined with manga and novels, many I had read myself, some I was still waiting on for the next volume or sequel. But she never told me what she planned to bring here, and I couldn't get a clear picture of what this empty space would look like once it belonged to her.

Miyagi was stingy like that, always keeping things to herself.

I closed the door and went back to the living area, staring down at my phone again. Time seemed to move unbearably slowly. She never sent messages like "I'm almost there" or "I'll be there soon," and without them, even a single minute stretched out as if it lasted twice as long. I knew pacing the apartment wouldn't make time go faster, but I couldn't stop moving. I circled the dining area once before sitting down, still fidgeting.

I hadn't seen her since graduation, and I had been waiting for this day for weeks. Ten or twenty minutes should have been nothing, but my heart wouldn't calm down.

I stopped shuffling my feet and glanced at my phone again. To

distract myself, I started searching for things we might still need for the apartment, making mental notes as I went, but nothing seemed to stick. The information slipped away as soon as I read it, and no matter how hard I tried, my head refused to hold on to it. With a small sigh, I gave the side of my head a light slap, as if to jog my memory, then drew in three slow breaths.

And then—my ears caught a sound.

The faint creak of the front door opening.

I immediately stood up.

Just as I was about to head for the front door, the one leading into the dining and kitchen area opened, and Miyagi stepped inside.

I'd given her a key a while ago, so it didn't bother me that she came in without ringing the intercom, but what did bother me was that she never gave me a heads-up. Any normal person would've at least sent a quick message like, "I'm at the station" or "I'm in front of the building." I knew she wasn't the type to contact me like that, but still, I couldn't help wishing she had said something.

Before I could complain, though, there was something else I wanted to say first.

"Welcome home, Miyagi."

I greeted her with a faint smile. She wore a hoodie and jeans I'd seen her in before, and she gave me a puzzled look.

"Welcome 'home'? Shouldn't it just be 'welcome'?"

"This is your home now too, so I think 'welcome home' fits better."

The day she chose the envelope over the pendant, it was decided that this apartment would become her home. And ever since then, I'd been waiting for this moment—because I wanted "Welcome home" to be the very first words I greeted her with.

"… I'm home."

I hadn't asked her to, but Miyagi gave exactly the reply I'd been longing to hear.

That made me really happy.

I was so happy, I wanted to throw open the window and shout it for the whole world to hear.

After all this time, the words “I’m home” had finally been answered with “Welcome home.”

"Welcome home."

I said once more, and she replied once again with, “I’m home.”

I told Miyagi to set her luggage down for now and offered to show her around the apartment.

"This apartment’s not so big that I’d need a tour, though."

"That’s true, but it’s just common courtesy."

I smiled as Miyagi set her luggage down.

"I guess if you want to show me around, then go ahead."

She said in a flat voice.

She was always a little cold with me, so I didn’t mind.

After showing her the changing room, the toilet, and the bathing area, we returned to the dining and kitchen space.

"This is the dining and kitchen area. That’s about it for our shared spaces. Oh, and lastly, your room’s over there, and mine’s the one next to it."

"… Thanks. I’ll go bring my stuff to my room."

"Wait, before that—do you want something to drink? I bought some soda and barley tea."

"I’m okay."

She answered curtly, but I didn’t want her to leave just yet.

"It’s been a while since we last saw each other. Why don’t we chat a bit? How have you been?"

"I’ve been okay. Can’t you tell just by looking at me?"

"Even if I could guess just by looking, I wouldn’t know for sure unless I asked, right?"

"I guess you have a point there… How have you been, Sendai-san?"

"As you can see, I’ve been fine too."

I smiled, but the conversation stalled.

The dining and kitchen area fell silent, and Miyagi, looking a little troubled, twisted the strings of her hoodie around her fingers. This kind of silence—something that hadn’t been between us for a long time—felt strange, like I couldn’t just ignore it like I used to be able to. I tapped my fingertips on the table and looked at her. She undid the strings, turned her back to me, and said, “I’m going to put my stuff in my room.”

"I’ve been waiting all this time for you, Miyagi."

I called as she walked away with her luggage.

"You say that, but it hasn’t even been that long, has it? It feels like we only graduated a few days ago."

Miyagi said without turning around.

"I moved into the apartment first, so it feels like it’s been a long time for me. The moving company’s supposed to be here around four, right?"

"Yeah."

"I see."

The words faded quickly, and silence fell again. The atmosphere was starting to stagnate, so I tried to sound as cheerful as I could.

"I’m looking forward to living with you, Miyagi."

Miyagi, who had still been facing away, turned around. She furrowed her brows and pressed her fingers to them before quietly saying,

"… Looking forward to it, too."

With that, she disappeared into her room.

A new place. An unfamiliar Miyagi. It felt like the road ahead wouldn’t be easy, but from the bottom of my heart, I was glad she had chosen the envelope that day.

Chapter 44

A Side of Miyagi I Don't Know (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 136

It had been thirty minutes since I'd introduced myself and exchanged greetings at my new job, and the tension in my body finally began to ease. Mio's upperclassman had told me that being a private tutor wasn't as hard as I was making it out to be, but doing anything for the first time always made me nervous.

Just like we'd planned, my part-time job as a private tutor began after Golden Week ended. But it wasn't going as smoothly as when I used to tutor Miyagi.

I didn't know how much small talk was allowed, or how close I was supposed to get to the student. Mio's upperclassman had said I should imagine being like a teacher, but I didn't have a clear image of what that meant for me—and before I could figure it out, the first day arrived.

My student introduced herself as Hanamaki Kikyou, a third-year middle schooler. She was sitting across the table from me now, staring so hard at her workbook it looked like she might burn a hole through it.

I sipped the barley tea her mother had brought for us.

It reminded me of how Miyagi used to serve me barley tea after school.

"Sensei."

Hanamaki-san looked up and called out to me.

Being called "sensei" felt a little strange and made me a little uneasy —it wasn't something I'd ever been called before starting this job.

"Was there anything you didn't understand?"

I glanced at her notebook. Her handwriting was clean and organized. In the past thirty minutes, I'd already realized Hanamaki-san was more than capable when it came to studying—honestly, she didn't seem like someone who even needed a tutor. Her mother had asked me to help her prepare for her high school entrance exams, but from the looks of it, there wasn't much to worry about.

"No, I understand it just fine. I just wanted to ask—why are you working as a private tutor?"

Hanamaki-san looked straight at me as she asked, her tone calm despite her bright, active appearance. Her short hair was neatly tucked behind her ears—unlike Miyagi's—but like Miyagi, she wore her uniform perfectly by the book.

"Hmm…"

I mumbled, unsure how to answer.

Part of me wanted to say, "I just needed the money," but I knew that wouldn't be appropriate to answer with.

"I guess… it's because I enjoy teaching people."

"Do you tutor a lot?"

"Just my friends, mostly."

That wasn't really the right way to describe what Miyagi was to me, but I couldn't explain that while I was on the job. I quickly started talking about something else to steer the conversation away from having to talk about it.

"What about you, Hanamaki-san? Do you prefer being taught, or do you like teaching others?"

"I like being taught. My older sister used to help me study a lot."

I took another sip of barley tea at the mention of something I didn't really want to hear.

It brought back memories—of my older sister who could do

everything, and of myself, who could only do things well enough.

Our parents used to treat us both equally, but once our differences became clearer, most of their attention went to her. That shift created a distance between us that had never really gone away.

Still, maybe it wasn't such a bad thing.

If they'd continued to dote on me the way they did before, I probably wouldn't be living with Miyagi now.

I drank more tea, trying to swallow the memories along with it.

"Does your sister still help you now?"

"She lives on campus at a high school she got into on a sports recommendation."

"Oh, I see."

I set my empty cup on the table.

Hanamaki-san didn't seem like the athletic type, so it was hard to picture what her sister was like—but that didn't really matter. What mattered was that the tense atmosphere had finally started to lighten.

I wasn't terrible at dealing with awkward silences, but I didn't want to be stuck in one for the whole session.

We weren't that far apart in age, but I still didn't know what we had in common. So we just kept working through her assignments, chatting here and there about small things.

I was going to be doing this twice a week, ninety minutes each time.

It would probably take a little more time before I got used to being her tutor, but just as we were starting to warm up to each other, our time was up.

After saying goodbye to her mother, I headed to the front door.

As I was putting on my shoes, Hanamaki-san—who was around the same height as Miyagi—bowed politely and said, "Thank you,"

smiling brightly as she saw me off.

Come to think of it, I hadn't seen Miyagi smile once since we started living together. I couldn't help but think how nice it would be if she could smile like that, too.

I got on the train and headed home.

Hanamaki-san was smart and easy to talk to.

She was the complete opposite of Miyagi, who almost never gave me a straight answer.

'Well, it'd probably creep me out if Miyagi suddenly became honest, though,' I thought to myself as the train swayed along a route I wasn't used to. After getting off, I passed through the ticket gate and followed the usual path home. I climbed the stairs to the third floor and unlocked the door to our apartment.

Miyagi's shoes were at the entrance, but she was nowhere in sight.

My stomach let out a quiet growl.

I'd told her I'd be home late, so she'd probably already eaten without me. Still, I knocked on her door, despite already knowing the answer.

Once, then twice, then three times.

Before I could even peek inside her room, Miyagi opened her door, slammed it shut behind her, and walked straight into our shared space.

"Did you already eat?"

I asked before she could say anything.

"I did."

"What'd you have?"

"Instant noodles."

She muttered.

"You should eat properly."

"Why does it matter? I was eating alone anyway. Was that all you wanted?"

"I was going to make some tea. Want some?"

That wasn't what I was aiming for, but I played it off like it was. I'd been hoping we could eat together, but with that off the table, I had no other way to keep the conversation going.

"What about your dinner, Sendai-san?"

"I'll eat later."

"You should eat right now."

"Fine. But at least have some tea with me."

Before she could turn back to her room, I grabbed her arm and pulled her to her chair.

As the kettle boiled, I opened the fridge.

I didn't want to end up like Miyagi, but today, I didn't feel like cooking for one.

I filled a pot with water and dropped in a packet of instant stew. While it simmered, I poured some tea into a mug and handed it to Miyagi. Then, I scooped rice onto a plate and poured the stew over it.

I knew it was better to eat them separately, but I didn't feel like washing more dishes today. It was the first day of my first part-time job, and I was exhausted. So, I ate it the same way Miyagi had served it to me before.

As I brought the plate over and sat down, Miyagi spoke up first.

"… Hey, what's the student you're tutoring like?"

"She's a good kid. She seems to keep up with her studies, and she's polite too."

"Is that so?"

Miyagi responded flatly, like she couldn't care less.

"She seems pretty honest and straightforward too. Totally unlike you, Miyagi."

I said on purpose as I took another bite of my stew. After swallowing, I glanced over at her. She was tapping her fingers on the table.

"I don't need to be honest with you, Sendai-san."

"Then who would you be honest with?"

"Anyone but you."

"Yeah, I figured you'd say that."

Even if the thought of Miyagi being honest with me felt kind of creepy, I still found myself wishing she'd be a little more straightforward sometimes.

For example, I wanted her to show me her ears if I asked.

Unlike Hanamaki-san, Miyagi had her ears hidden again today. Her hair completely blocked them, covering the earrings she'd gotten for my sake. I was pretty sure she kept them hidden at school too, but I had a feeling if Utsunomiya ever asked to see them, she'd gladly show her without hesitation.

I nearly sighed, but instead, I took another bite of stew and swallowed the sigh along with it.

Then I opened my mouth again.

"Miyagi. You already went out of your way to get your ears pierced. Why not just leave them uncovered?"

She frowned at me from across the table.

She paused for a moment, like she was thinking something through, then reached up and tucked her hair behind her ears.

I almost dropped my spoon, but managed to set it down on the plate like normal.

"Promise me something, Sendai-san."

Miyagi said as she walked over to my side.

"What is it?"

"That you'll make dinner for us tomorrow."

"… Sure. What do you want to eat?"

I reached my hand out to Miyagi. Instead of making a promise on her earrings, I simply touched them.

I wanted to kiss her ear—but I couldn't bring myself to move. Something about the way she was right now felt different from the Miyagi I knew.

"I want to eat whatever you like, Sendai-san."

"Okay."

I answered while running through a list of recipes in my head.

A Side of Miyagi I Don't Know (II)

Part 137

Keeping the promise I'd made with Miyagi was easy.

Making dinner wasn't all that hard.

But figuring out what to make was another story.

I wandered around the supermarket, eyes scanning the shelves.

Miyagi had told me to make something I liked, but nothing came to mind.

"What should I do…"

I muttered to myself as I stood in front of the meat section, staring blankly at rows of pork, beef, and chicken.

It wasn't something I needed to overthink.

She'd said to make whatever I liked, which probably meant anything would be fine.

Still, it didn't sit right to cook something she wouldn't enjoy. That was the part I kept getting stuck on.

Even though we'd spent a lot of time together, I still didn't know much about what Miyagi liked or disliked when it came to food.

The first time I made something at her place, I'd gone with karaage.

Back then, I hadn't been too concerned about her preferences, so choosing had been simple.

"Karaage, huh…"

She'd said it was good, so going with that felt like a safe choice.

I thought back to that day a little more.

I'd asked Miyagi to cut up some cabbage, but she ended up cutting her own finger instead. Then she made me lick her blood. She was always ordering me to do weird things like that. No one else would ever ask me to do something like that.

Only Miyagi would.

I let out a quiet sigh and tried to return my thoughts to what to make for dinner.

Come to think of it, she'd served me frozen Hamburg steaks a few times.

Since it wasn't just once, maybe she liked them.

I picked up a pack of ground beef and placed it in my basket.

As I walked through the supermarket, I grabbed onions and breadcrumbs too, then pulled out my phone.

I had a feeling I was missing something. A quick recipe search proved me right.

I added milk and nutmeg to the basket—skipping the eggs since I remembered we had some at home—and headed to the register.

When I got back home, I saw Miyagi's shoes at the entrance, but she wasn't anywhere in the common space.

I walked over to her door and let her know I was starting dinner.

I put everything away in the fridge, except for the onion, then took out a knife and cutting board.

After dicing the onion, I started frying it.

I placed the ground meat in a bowl and cooled the bottom with ice water before kneading. I added salt, pepper, and nutmeg, then kneaded some more. I mixed in the fried onion, milk-soaked breadcrumbs, and eggs, and kept kneading.

I spent so long just working the mixture with my hands that I almost forgot what I was even making.

Making Hamburg steaks was more time-consuming than I'd expected, even though it looked like all you had to do was shape some ground meat and fry it.

I started to regret not just buying premade patties.

But I was too far in to stop now.

I shaped the mixture into thick patties, tossing them between my hands to press out any air, just like I'd seen chefs do on TV.

Once they were ready, I heated up a frying pan and laid the patties on it.

They sizzled as they hit the pan.

While they cooked, I began throwing together a salad and called out for Miyagi.

I waited for the Hamburg steaks to cook under the lid of the frying pan when Miyagi came out of her room. She muttered a quiet, "Welcome back," then silently began scooping rice onto some plates.

Yesterday, Miyagi had suddenly asked me to make her a promise. She'd sounded like she wanted something serious from me, but it had turned out to be nothing major.

Just making dinner didn't feel like something worth swearing on her earrings over.

I placed the Hamburg steaks onto the plates Miyagi had set out, then glanced over at her. She didn't look happy or even mildly pleased. I had no idea what had been going through her head when she asked me to cook for us tonight.

"What about the sauce?"

Miyagi asked, eyeing the Hamburg steaks.

"I'm going to make it now."

I poured some ketchup and sauce into the frying pan and brought it to a light simmer. Once it was ready, I poured it over our Hamburg

steaks and brought the plates to the table.

"Let’s eat."

We said in unison.

Since we didn’t have any dining knives, I cut my steak with chopsticks. The patty was soft and fluffy. When I sliced into the edge, the juices spilled out—it had cooked better than I expected. I took a bite and was honestly tempted to praise myself; it tasted like something you could get at a restaurant. But Miyagi said nothing.

"Is it good?"

I asked, watching her silently eat across from me.

"It is. Do you like Hamburg steaks, Sendai-san?"

"They’re okay, I guess?"

If someone had asked whether I liked them or not, I’d probably lean toward saying I did. But since I hadn’t made them because I liked them, I gave a vague answer.

"Why’d you answer like that? Didn’t you cook them because you liked them?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so. Do you like Hamburg steaks, Miyagi?"

I stared at her, wondering if it’d be fine to start calling Hamburg steaks one of my favorite foods from now on.

"I think they’re okay, too."

Miyagi gave an answer I couldn’t tell was true or not, and popped another bite into her mouth. I continued cutting mine into pieces and ate as well.

The conversation trailed off, and we finished our meal in silence.

The Hamburg steaks that had taken so much time to make were gone in less than half the time it took to prepare.

"What are you going to do after this, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi asked, setting down her chopsticks without looking at me.

"I have to prepare for my next tutoring session. Or I guess I mean I need to review for it. The student I'm teaching is in middle school, and I barely remember the material from back then, so I feel a little uneasy if I don't brush up."

"You're taking this really seriously, even though it's just a part-time job."

"Hey, even part-time jobs need to be taken seriously, you know?"

"Hmm."

Miyagi sounded completely uninterested. She walked over to the fridge, pulled out a bottle of barley tea, and brought it—along with a cup—back to the table. She set it down louder than she normally would. That alone was enough to tell me she was in a bad mood.

"Thanks."

I said, but she didn't respond.

She sat back down across from me without a word.

"Why don't you get a part-time job too, Miyagi?"

"No."

She replied coldly, and the conversation came to a stop again.

Judging by how the conversation had gone, I could guess what was putting her in such a bad mood.

Bringing up my part-time job had been a bad idea.

Miyagi had started acting strange after I mentioned it yesterday, too.

"… Can I come to your room after I finish cleaning up the dishes?"

Miyagi asked suddenly.

It came completely out of left field.

Honestly, it wasn't even something she should've been asking.

I thought I'd made it pretty clear that I needed to review for work.

So if she came to my room, she'd only get in the way.

"Okay."

But for some reason, the word left my mouth without hesitation—something I hadn't meant to say at all.

"I'll start cleaning up, then."

Miyagi said, getting up and picking up our empty plates and cups.

Everything about this felt off.

Even so, I couldn't bring myself to turn her down.

I could study after she went back to her room.

Or I could do it on the train.

The sound of dishes being washed echoed from the kitchen.

I couldn't bring myself to offer to help.

Even though this wasn't the first time Miyagi had come to my room, I felt nervous.

When I stood up, my chair scraped against the floor with an unusually loud clatter.

Miyagi walked over to me.

"I'm done."

"So, you're coming over to my room?"

"Yeah."

Normally, she would've said something like, "If you don't want me

to come, then I won't," but not today.

She followed me back to my room and took a seat beside me like it was the most natural thing in the world. But once she sat down, she went quiet.

She didn't even try to make conversation.

With a stern look on her face, she flipped through a dictionary that had been left out on my table and rested it on her lap.

"Is something wrong?"

I asked Miyagi, who'd asked to come here herself yet hadn't said a word since.

"What do you mean?"

She replied, looking up from the dictionary.

"Why are you in such a bad mood?"

"I'm not in a bad mood."

She was definitely in a bad mood.

Her voice was low, and she wouldn't even look at me.

She'd been off during dinner, too, but now she seemed even worse.

It was hard to believe she'd wanted to come to my room in the first place.

"Was there something you wanted to do here?"

"What, am I not allowed to be here unless I do?"

"You're allowed to be here. But if you're going to stay, you better lighten up."

"I told you, I'm not in a bad mood or anything."

Miyagi was always stubborn about stuff like this.

Even if she was in a bad mood, she'd never admit it, and the whole conversation would just go in circles.

Her mood turning sour out of nowhere wasn't exactly unusual, but since she'd come to my room of her own accord, I really wished she'd loosen up at least a little.

"If you want to prove you're not in a bad mood, you're going to have to smile every now and then."

I wasn't saying she needed to be like Hanamaki-san or anything, but it wouldn't hurt if she smiled once in a while.

I'd kept my promise and made dinner for us tonight—something Miyagi had arbitrarily decided on her own yesterday—and I'd even changed my plans just to be with her right now.

So I felt like I was entitled to at least this much.

"I do smile."

Miyagi said, though her face was as sullen as ever.

"No, you don't."

"I do. Just at school, though."

Of course.

I already knew that.

Miyagi smiled when she was with other people, in other places.

Even back in high school, I'd seen her smiling at school plenty of times.

When we were in the same class during our second year, she'd laugh in front of Utsunomiya, and in our third year, I'd seen her smile in the hallway.

Miyagi always smiled whenever I wasn't around.

And the thought that she was probably still smiling around Utsunomiya, just like she used to, annoyed me.

"I want to see you smile right here, right now."

We went to different universities now.

If I didn't ask her to smile here, I might never get to see it at all.

I'd rather see her in a good mood than a bad one, so if possible, I wanted her to smile.

"There's nothing that I find amusing right now, so I can't do it."

"Smiling is so easy, though. All you have to do is lift the corners of your mouth."

I pressed my fingers against the corners of Miyagi's lips and pushed them upward.

The dictionary on her lap slipped off and hit the floor with a dull thud.

I knew this was only going to make her more irritated, but I didn't really care. Nothing I said or did was going to improve her mood anyway.

I forced her mouth into a smile, and although her lips curved up, her brows drew together.

It didn't look like a smile—it looked kind of funny, actually.

Then she grabbed my wrists.

She pulled my hands away from her face and sank her teeth into one of my fingers.

She bit down hard—hard enough that I could feel her teeth pressing right into the bone.

I tried to pull back on reflex, but I couldn't.

Instead, her teeth dug even deeper into my skin than before.

A Side of Miyagi I Don't Know (III)

Part 138

"Hey, Miyagi! That hurts."

My body stiffened from the pain.

She was biting me so hard it felt like she was trying to crush the bone, and a sharp throb shot all the way to my head.

"I said that hurts!"

I slapped her shoulder, hoping she'd let go and return the finger she was holding hostage, but she refused to budge. What started off as just me wanting to see her smile had somehow turned into this.

Miyagi had never been the type to hold back, but she was hurting me more than usual today. I didn't know what her problem was, but her bite was relentless.

It hurt. It burned. My head felt light.

"Miyagi!"

I hit her shoulder hard enough that the sound echoed. But even that didn't stop her. In desperation, I reached out and touched her earring. She was hurting me so much that I felt like I could tear her ear off—but instead, I only gave it a small tug. Her soft earlobe stretched, and finally, the teeth around my finger loosened. I yanked it free.

"Stop trying to eat my finger. Was the Hamburg steak not filling enough for you?"

The finger she bit had deep, clear marks.

It hurt so much that if she'd said she was saving me for dessert, I might've believed her.

It still hurt, even now.

"If I wanted to eat something, I'd pick something that actually tastes good."

Miyagi replied flatly, grabbing a few tissues and roughly wiping my finger down. A sharp sting shot through it.

"If you want me to smile, then do something funny, Sendai-san."

She picked the dictionary up from the floor and set it back on the desk before looking at me.

"I already know you're never going to smile in front of me no matter what I do, so I'll just give up."

I rubbed my aching finger. Even though I was used to Miyagi hurting me like this, I still furrowed my brows.

"If you were fine with not seeing me smile, then you shouldn't have gone and done something like that to begin with."

"Yeah, you're right. I was an idiot for trying to make someone smile when they clearly didn't want to."

"That's right. How about you smile for me instead, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi placed her fingers at the corners of my lips and tried to lift them the same way I had done to her earlier.

She yanked them up so hard that I shook her hands off.

"Hey, what are you trying to do? You're seriously starting to get on my nerves."

"What am I trying to do—?"

Miyagi trailed off, her gaze falling on my finger—the one she'd just bitten.

A bad feeling crept in, and I tried to pull my hand back, but it was too late.

She grabbed it.

"Hey, that hurts. Let go."

I tried to pull it back toward me, but instead, she pulled with so much force that I thought she might actually rip it off.

Overwhelmed by the pain, I leaned in toward her.

"Seriously, what are you trying to do?"

I asked again, still leaning in close, but she didn't respond.

"If there's something you want, then just say it already."

I said firmly—and she finally let go of my finger.

But then, she reached for the collar of my blouse.

Miyagi pulled me closer, her face stopping just short of mine—close enough for our breaths to mix.

She didn't say a word.

Our eyes met briefly, and then she looked away.

She let go of my collar, and I grabbed her arm.

"What, you're not going to continue?"

"There is no continuation."

Miyagi said as she shook my hand off, moving back just far enough to put space between us again.

"Then let's make one up right now."

"Sendai-san, do you…"

Miyagi started to say something, but her words trailed off again.

"Why don't you finish that sentence?"

"— Sendai-san, do you want there to be a continuation?"

"If I said yes, what would you do?"

"If there's something you want me to do, just ask. I'll do it."

The pain that had been throbbing in my finger all this time finally started to fade.

I reached out and held Miyagi's hand.

She didn't pull away, but she still wouldn't look at me.

Right now, I could probably get Miyagi to do what she'd been about to do.

The thought alone made the finger she'd bitten earlier feel strangely warm.

I exhaled.

"Okay, then kiss me."

I said to Miyagi, who continued to avoid my gaze.

"That's not how you ask for something."

"Please kiss me. Is that better?"

"Okay."

Miyagi said, and then slowly leaned in toward me.

But before our lips could touch, Miyagi stopped. She looked like she was about to let go of my hand, too.

At times like this, Miyagi always lost her nerve. She had no problem going all out with unnecessary things, but when it came to moments that actually mattered, she would falter.

"You said you'd do it if I asked, so do it properly."

I said, trying to hold her to her word before she could run away again, then closed my eyes.

I felt her draw closer.

She gripped my hand tightly, and then our lips met.

The kiss was so soft that I barely felt her warmth at first.

After a brief moment, Miyagi pulled away.

When I opened my eyes, I saw that she'd only moved back slightly, like she was still being cautious. That kind of attitude didn't sit well with me—it didn't feel right to count that as her holding up her end of the deal.

"That's it?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Do it again."

"No. You're thinking weird stuff again, Sendai-san."

She shook off my hand.

But even then, she didn't move away.

Even when I shifted a little closer, she stayed where she was, still sitting beside me.

Miyagi felt different today—like her mind was somewhere else.

Normally, she'd get irritated like a stray cat and keep me at a distance.

"… How's Utsunomiya been lately?"

I spoke up, afraid that if I stayed quiet, Miyagi would head straight back to her room. But I didn't know what to talk to her about today, so I reached for something we could at least both comment on.

"She's fine."

"Why don't you invite her over sometime?"

"Why would I invite Maika over?"

"You two are friends, right? I think it'd be fine."

"I'm not doing that."

She gave the exact response I'd expected, cutting off the conversation I'd just barely managed to start.

Well, it would've been a pain if she actually had invited her, though.

Still, I did want to hear what Utsunomiya knew about Miyagi at school. She definitely knew a lot more about Miyagi than I did. But at the same time, there was also a side of Miyagi that Utsunomiya didn't know—something only I got to see. I just wasn't sure how much of that was really unknown to her.

"Miyagi."

I said her name, trying to open up another conversation, as I looked over at her.

"Have you ever kissed Utsunomiya before?"

Miyagi gave me a look full of disbelief.

But I wanted to know.

I wondered if Utsunomiya had ever felt just how soft Miyagi's lips were.

"What, are you the type who kisses your friends, Sendai-san?"

"No."

"Neither am I."

Even though Miyagi wasn't the type to kiss her friends, she had just kissed me. I knew that was because, even though we lived together, we weren't friends. We'd never actually been friends—and somehow, that made me feel a little glad.

I brushed my hand against Miyagi's cheek.

She didn't seem to mind me leaning in.

But she wouldn't close her eyes, so I closed mine instead.

I kissed her over and over again—light kisses where I barely felt the softness of her lips before pulling away.

Then, I parted her lips and slipped my tongue into her mouth, going deeper.

I kept kissing Miyagi.

Her body temperature felt close to mine, and since she quietly let me do it, I figured she didn't mind. Being able to touch someone like this—someone who wasn't a friend—made me want to keep touching her. I could feel her warmth through her tongue, just like I had earlier when she bit me. That hadn't just hurt—it had felt good, too. And right now, it felt so good, I didn't want to stop kissing her.

I leaned more of my weight against her.

But just as I tried to push her down, she shoved me away by the shoulder, and the space between us returned.

"Sendai-san."

Miyagi said, her voice neither cold nor warm.

"What is it?"

"… Quit your job."

She said—words I couldn't believe were coming out of her mouth right after we'd kissed. She grabbed the finger she'd bitten earlier. The sharp pain brought my rising body temperature back down.

"Why?"

There was no reason Miyagi should be telling me to quit my job.

It was my job. It wasn't like I was bothering her by doing it. And I didn't plan on ever making it her problem, either.

I stared at her.

But she stayed quiet, her face unreadable.

"It’d be a hassle for the student if I quit now, and besides, I actually like tutoring, so I’m not going to."

I liked it a lot more than working at a convenience store or a restaurant, and the hourly pay was better, too. The faster I finished my part-time work, the more time I’d have to spend at home.

"I know."

Miyagi said, letting go of my finger.

"Then why’d you say that?"

"I just felt like saying it."

She muttered, and held my hand again.

Something was off.

She wasn’t acting like herself.

I wanted to ask her why she’d told me to quit, but I had the feeling that if I did, she’d get up and head back to her room. Her hand in mine felt too nice—I didn’t want to let go of it.

So I held her hand back, without saying anything.

Chapter 45

The Days Sendai-san Isn't Around (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 139

I knew I'd done something bad to Sendai-san.

I felt guilty about it.

But even so, it seemed a little strange that she was still wearing a bandage on her finger even though it had already been a week.

"How long are you planning to keep that on?"

I asked as I stared at her finger, then took a bite of the toast she'd made for us today. I'd spread butter and jam on it—it had the perfect balance of sweet and salty, and it was quickly becoming a breakfast staple.

"The bandage, you mean?"

Back when we were in high school, Sendai-san once asked me to cut a cabbage while she was making karaage, and I ended up cutting my finger instead. She wrapped it with a bandage—a plain one, not cute at all. And now, she had one wrapped around her finger in the exact same way.

"Yeah."

"Hmm…"

She murmured, then took a sip of orange juice.

That night she made Hamburg steaks, I'd bitten her finger hard enough to leave a mark. I figured it would, but it couldn't have lasted this long.

"The mark's already gone, isn't it?"

"Hmm, who knows."

Sendai-san replied in her usual tone, but she wouldn't look at me.

It was one of those days.

And even though I knew that, I still found myself irritated. Then I got annoyed at myself for being irritated over something so small.

"Take the bandage off."

I really wanted to grab her hand and tear it off myself, but instead, I kept chewing my toast.

Just because she wasn't mad at me didn't mean I could do whatever I wanted. There were things you could and couldn't do. Grabbing her and forcing it off would be crossing the line.

"That'd be a waste. I just put it on."

"Are you trying to send a message with it or something?"

"A message? Why would you think that?"

She looked puzzled.

"You're wearing it because you're mad I bit you, right?"

My tone sharpened, so I stuffed some scrambled eggs in my mouth to cover it up.

Sendai-san was the only person I couldn't deal with properly.

I wanted to act normal around her, but I couldn't.

We were going to be living together until we graduated, so I wanted to stay calm around her—like I always did with Maika—but it never worked out that way.

Even knowing it wasn't right, I kept doing things to her that were cruel.

And whenever she was around, my emotions got harder to control.

I wasn't great at getting along with people to begin with, but I'd never bitten or kicked anyone before. Yet for some reason, I kept doing that sort of thing to her.

"You do that kind of stuff all the time. I wouldn't get mad about it now."

"Liar."

I'd bitten her as hard as I could, and I knew she wouldn't get mad.

But every time I saw the bandage, I remembered what I did—remembered the things I'd said that I shouldn't have—and it hurt.

I shouldn't have bitten her that hard.

I shouldn't have told her to quit her job.

That's all I kept thinking about.

I already knew she wouldn't quit just because I asked, and as expected, she refused.

She still worked as a private tutor, and sometimes, she'd even tell me about her student.

Sometimes she listened to me, and sometimes she didn't.

I wasn't sure where the line was—what she would and wouldn't do—but there were definitely some things she'd never obey.

She wouldn't let me pierce her ears.

She wouldn't quit her job.

Even if I asked, she'd turn me down. Sendai-san wasn't going to change just because I told her to.

"Miyagi. Don't start your morning in such a bad mood."

She said in a flat voice, chewing on her toast.

"I'm not in a bad mood."

"Okay, fine, you're not in a bad mood. Then what's wrong?"

There was nothing wrong with me.

If anything was wrong, it was her job.

I really wish she hadn't become a private tutor.

Any other job would've been fine.

"Nothing. It's just the way I talk. Honestly, I think it's rude of you to be so nitpicky."

I said, covering up how I really felt, and downed half my orange juice before setting the glass back down.

"I see. Well, I'm sure you know this already, but I've got work today. I'll be home late again. Eat dinner without me."

"Okay."

Sendai-san had mentioned that she tutored her student twice a week. But knowing she still planned on going today left me feeling a little depressed.

Every time I heard the words "private tutor," my mind went back to last summer, to the days when she helped me study.

I didn't actually think Sendai-san would do anything like that at her job. But every time I heard the word "tutoring"—a word I'd always associate with what happened over summer break—it brought to mind all kinds of questions I wanted to ask her.

Did she sit beside her like she used to with me?

Did she ever try to hold her hand?

— Even though Sendai-san told me she wasn't the type to kiss her friends, would she ever try to kiss her student?

There were so many things I wanted to know, and a few I couldn't stop thinking about. One of them was the fact that we went to different schools. That much, at least, I could chalk up to

circumstance. It was something I could accept. I could imagine what her school life was like by drawing from my own experiences, past and present. It had taken me time, but I could handle that now.

Tutoring, though, was a different story.

It was so strongly tied to our past that I couldn't bring myself to accept the most obvious truth. Some part of me couldn't help but compare it to the time we used to spend together after school and during summer vacation.

Getting a part-time job was normal. It wasn't something I should've been so hung up on. I knew that. I'd assumed I'd be able to come to terms with it once she actually started working, but I was wrong.

Whenever I pictured her as a tutor, my thoughts drifted back to the past.

The Sendai-san who had taught me, and the Sendai-san currently tutoring someone else, felt like different people. I knew they weren't the same—but I still wanted to confirm that somehow. And at the same time, I didn't want to know.

I was acting strange.

Even if I did ask her about it, her answers would probably be normal, nothing out of the ordinary. I knew how weird it was to be comparing how she treated her student with how she used to treat me.

I knew that.

But it still bothered me. I couldn't calm down.

I wanted to swallow and digest these feelings the way I did the Hamburg steak she made. But they refused to go down and sat heavy in my stomach, making me feel sick.

"I have to go soon, Miyagi."

Sendai-san said, finishing her breakfast and downing the last of her orange juice.

"Wait. Take the bandage off before you go."

"You're still going on about that?"

The truth was, I didn't care about the bandage anymore.

I just wanted to keep her here. I just couldn't come up with a reason that would make her stay.

"I just want to see what your finger looks like now."

"It looks like any other finger."

She let out a small sigh, clearly annoyed, but peeled the bandage off anyway. Her finger was slightly swollen, but clean—fair, with no marks left behind.

There'd never been any need for her to wear a bandage at all.

"The mark's already gone."

"Maybe it healed under the bandage."

She said, like it was nothing, as she rubbed her finger. And then, unlike earlier, she looked straight at me and smiled.

She'd been smiling at me like that a lot lately.

But that smile wasn't the real Sendai-san. It reminded me too much of the smile she'd worn when we saw that movie together during summer break—something forced, something pasted on. Maybe that's why her smiles now made me feel so uneasy.

I touched my earring.

If I could, I wanted to make her swear on my earrings that she'd quit her part-time job. But they were just earrings. They couldn't turn pumpkins into carriages or grant wishes like a genie. They were just decorations, holding onto promises that only comforted me.

Even if I made Sendai-san promise me something, there was no guarantee she'd actually keep it.

"Can you do the dishes after you're done eating, Miyagi?"

"Okay."

"Thanks. I want to head to campus a bit early today."

She stood up and went back to her room. I took another bite of my toast.

It was sweet, and a little salty—but it didn't taste good.

And once I got home later, I'd be eating another lazy dinner all by myself. Just thinking about it made my stomach churn. I had a feeling the rest of my day was already ruined.

The Days Sendai-san Isn't Around (II)

Part 140

My options for dinner included instant noodles or a frozen Hamburg steak.

Or I could cook something for myself.

After giving it some thought, I grabbed a frozen Hamburg steak from the refrigerator and heated it up. I was going to be eating alone, so cooking felt like too much of a hassle. Sendai-san had mentioned this morning that she'd be home late because of work, but even if she hadn't told me, I already knew I'd be having dinner alone.

I plated the Hamburg steak and scooped some rice beside it. A salad would've been nice, but adding more food wouldn't make it taste any better when I was eating by myself. Meals were more delicious with other people. Alone, food just tasted okay. It was only there to make sure I wasn't hungry.

I ate with my chopsticks, quietly filling my stomach. Conversations with Sendai-san never flowed easily, and when I was alone, things were even quieter. I didn't need to say a single word, so I finished eating in no time.

With nothing left to do in the shared space, I washed my plate and returned to my room.

I picked up the black cat plushie from my bookshelf and tossed it onto my bed.

I followed suit and dove into bed, too.

Today hadn't been particularly fun, but it hadn't been awful either. Still, I wasn't in the best mood. I didn't feel like taking a bath or changing clothes. I didn't feel like doing my homework either. Instead, I hugged the black cat plush tightly.

"Meow."

I meowed in its place as I stroked its head.

The black cat plush I'd gotten for Christmas had become a source of comfort. Stroking its head helped distract me. If it had actually meowed, I felt like that alone would've cheered me up.

I held the plush close to my chest and closed my eyes.

I wasn't really sleepy, but with nothing to look at, my mind grew foggy, and the drowsiness crept in.

Maybe I'll nap for a little. Just thirty minutes.

Too lazy to set an alarm, I let the light in my room shine through my eyelids and drifted off. I could hear my own soft breathing, and the black cat plush slipped out of my arms.

As I drifted in and out of consciousness, I heard a sound coming from what felt like far away.

Knock, knock, knock.

When I realized it was the sound of someone knocking, I quickly sat up.

"What is it?"

I called toward the door, forcing my voice out.

"I bought some cake slices on the way home. Do you want to eat them together?"

I heard Sendai-san's cheerful voice from the other side.

"Cake?"

"Yep, cake. Come open your door already."

Urged by Sendai-san, I stepped out of my room.

As I shut the door behind me, she grabbed my arm.

"I bought a slice of shortcake, a strawberry tart, a no-bake

cheesecake, and a baked cheesecake. Pick whichever ones you want."

"Isn't this a bit much?"

"Come on, you can eat two, right? I'll make us some tea, have a seat first."

Even though I hadn't agreed to anything, she pulled me over by the arm and dragged me to the table.

Sendai-san pulled out the chair for me and smiled.

On the table was a white box—meaning she'd bought the cakes at a real bakery, not the convenience store.

I didn't dislike cake, and my stomach still had room left.

Maybe I couldn't eat two slices, but I could at least handle one.

I sat down like she told me to and looked up at her.

"… Did something good happen?"

"Do I need a reason to buy cake? Doesn't good food make you happy? Or do you just not like cake?"

"I do."

"Then it's fine, right? The water's already boiled, so I'll be right back."

Sendai-san returned with a teapot filled with loose tea leaves and two mugs. She poured the hot water into the pot using the electric kettle we'd bought together. After carefully timing the steeping with her phone, she poured the tea into the mugs.

"Pick whichever ones you like."

She opened the white box.

Inside were the four cake slices she'd mentioned earlier. They looked so good I almost wanted all of them, even though I knew I couldn't finish more than one.

I already knew which two I wanted, but I felt bad about choosing first.

"Since you bought them, you should pick first."

I said, handing the choice over to Sendai-san. She placed the shortcake and the no-bake cheesecake on my plate. Those were the two I had my eyes on, and she probably noticed from my gaze.

"Which ones do you like the most, Sendai-san?"

"The strawberry tart and the baked cheesecake."

She placed the remaining slices onto her own plate.

"Tell me—which ones do you actually like?"

"Well, I picked them based on my taste, so I like all of them."

Perhaps sensing I was about to say something troublesome, she peeled the plastic from her cheesecake.

“Let’s eat,” she said, cutting into the narrow end of the slice and taking a bite with her fork.

It felt like her way of ending the conversation, so I followed suit.

“Let’s eat,” I echoed, peeling the wrap from my shortcake.

I wanted to save the strawberries for last, so I moved them aside and took a bite from the point of the triangular slice. The lightly sweet whipped cream melted on my tongue and mixed with the fluffy sponge cake before sliding down into my stomach.

"Is it good?"

Sendai-san asked after taking a third bite.

"Yeah, it is… Thanks."

I continued eating the cake topped with whipped cream, scooping a generous bite onto my fork and bringing it to my mouth. It was hard to believe I’d already eaten dinner—the cake went down so easily.

Across the table, Sendai-san quietly ate her cheesecake.

She didn't talk about her part-time job.

She didn't ask what to do if a student asked her an unexpected question, or what middle schoolers think about these days.

She didn't talk about anything I didn't want to hear.

Honestly, I didn't want to hear about her job even on her days off.

The cake was delicious.

But something heavy and hard to digest welled up deep in my stomach.

"Sendai-san, come over here."

I called out to her and pointed at a spot diagonally in front of me.

She stood up with a puzzled look.

"With your chair."

I added.

She clattered her chair into place and sat down diagonally in front of me.

"Open your mouth."

I scooped some whipped cream with my finger, the coolness clinging to my skin.

Sendai-san furrowed her brows slightly.

I knew this wasn't a good idea. But still, she opened her mouth without resistance.

I reached out and stuck my fingertip into her mouth.

As I slid my fingertip into her open mouth, her lips closed around it, and her teeth touched the first joint. Her warm tongue pressed

against my finger, melting the whipped cream inside her mouth.

Sendai-san would do almost anything I asked.

Even now, without me ordering her to, she opened her mouth and licked my finger.

Watching her do as I said gave me a small sense of relief. It felt different from the times I used to give her orders, but it made me realize that some things were still the same.

I pushed my finger a little deeper.

She bit down in protest.

Still, when I pushed my finger deeper into her mouth, her tongue wrapped around it. The sensation—warmer and firmer than the whipped cream—was both pleasant and repulsive. I quickly pulled my finger out and wiped it with a tissue from the coverless box nearby.

"Why'd you lick it?"

"You told me to, didn't you, Miyagi?"

She said, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"All I told you to do was open your mouth."

"But what you really wanted was for me to lick your finger, right?"

She wasn't wrong.

But whenever she did something I hadn't told her to do—like she already knew what I wanted—it made me feel like I could ask her for anything and she'd do it.

— What if I asked her to quit her job again right now?

The thought nearly slipped out of my mouth, so instead, I pressed my fork into the shortcake. I took a small bite. It wasn't too sweet—soft, airy—but it weighed heavily in my stomach. Somehow, the whipped cream and sponge had turned to something more like lead or iron.

"Sendai-san, you said you didn't need a reason to buy cake, but… what's the real reason?"

I asked, trying to ignore the heavy feeling sitting in my stomach.

"I just wanted to eat something delicious."

"Really?"

"… No. I just wanted to cheer you up somehow."

Sendai-san let out a small sigh as she continued.

"Even now, you don't seem like you're in a good mood. Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?"

"I'm not in a bad mood."

"You definitely are. I'm not gonna ask you to smile for me, but can't you at least act a little happier?"

Sendai-san was always there for me, even when I was in a bad mood or didn't smile at her. She was always considerate of me like this, too.

So I knew it would've been fine if I acted a little happier around her once in a while—but I didn't even know how to do that in front of her.

Sendai-san was kind.

But I couldn't return that kindness. I was always doing things like I was testing her.

"Lick this. Maybe that'll make me feel better."

I said, holding out my finger—now bare of any whipped cream. Without hesitation, she took my hand and pulled it toward her. Just like I told her to, she brought my finger to her tongue and began licking it. Something warmer than her hand crept up my finger, and even though there was nothing left to taste, her tongue moved as if chasing remnants of whipped cream.

The base of my finger grew damp, and then her lips touched the back of my hand.

She pulled away slightly, only to lean in again, this time running her tongue along the top of my hand and up toward my wrist. Wherever her body heat touched me, the nerves there stirred like they'd woken up. Every stroke of her tongue sent a faint shiver through me, making my shoulders twitch.

My heart felt like it had shrunk to half its size, and it ached.

Sendai-san's tongue traced the veins in my wrist, down along my arm.

When her lips pressed against my skin again, I finally pulled my arm back. She let go easily, offering no resistance.

And yet, the moment her warmth disappeared, I felt a little disappointed.

I wanted to touch Sendai-san more than I wanted to eat the slices of cake.

"Close your eyes."

I said. Without a word, her eyes, which had been watching me, shut softly.

I stood and gently ran my hand along her cheek.

Then, I traced the shape of her lips with my fingertip. When I reached the center, she licked it again. As I pulled my hand away, Sendai-san reached up and tugged at my clothes, like she wanted me closer. I leaned in and lightly pressed my lips to hers.

It was only a light peck, so I didn't taste any whipped cream.

All I felt was the softness of her lips before I pulled away.

Sendai-san opened her eyes, and when our gazes met, she looked like she was about to say something, but I spoke first.

"Sendai-san, you never did keep your promise to go out to dinner with me, did you?"

I reminded her of the promise she made on my earrings back during Golden Week.

"I’ve just been so busy since the break ended."

She gave an excuse as I sat back down.

"Even though you’re the one who invited me."

"Do you want to go next Sunday?"

"Okay."

I replied curtly as I wiped my finger with a tissue, and Sendai-san drank her tea like nothing had happened.

Chapter 45 Extra

Platypus' Soliloquy

(Platypus PoV)
Part 140-extra

A pile of stuffed toys, a mountain of plush creatures.

Among them, a platypus not resembling a crocodile in the slightest.

That was me.

The one who chose me from the pile was Shiori Miyagi and I found myself employed in her home's kitchen as a tissue box cover.

Compared to living in disarray, subject to the scrutiny of visitors, the kitchen was comfortable and easy to live in. I didn't mind so much being jostled or having my arms tugged by the household members.

It felt good to have my once-empty body given purpose with a box of tissues, serving with pride to supply tissues to the home's occupants.

The view from my perch atop a slightly elevated color box was pleasant enough, and I even thought I might want to stay in this kitchen forever.

But those peaceful days were taken from me by Shiori Miyagi.

I was abruptly taken from my kitchen abode to "Sendai-san's" room without any prior warning by Shiori Miyagi.

At that time, I thought Shiori Miyagi was being unreasonable, but now, I'm grateful.

Because she made it so I could always be with Master.

Master is the one who brought me home from the checkout after

Shiori Miyagi selected me. Initially, much like Shiori Miyagi, she was just another resident of this house, but she won my affection by caressing and kissing me, so she became the one I should call Master.

Though I have certain thoughts about her treating Shiori Miyagi similarly, my privilege is to be with Master even when she sleeps in the same room. This privilege convinces me that I must be Master's number one.

Today, too, Master is in the room without Shiori Miyagi, gazing at me.

"Hmm—"

She lets out a small murmur and lightly taps my head as I lie on the floor.

"You still don't have a name, huh? Platypus, platypus, huh. 'Kaachan' sounds too much like a mother. 'Hashii' doesn't quite fit either..."

It seems Master is considering a name for me, muttering to herself.

"How about we let Miyagi name you?"

Master carelessly flops onto the floor.

No, thank you. It's not that I dislike Shiori Miyagi, but I'd rather not. I wish for Master to name me.

If only I could say that, but unfortunately, I cannot speak.

"Well, it's not like Miyagi would name you anyway. She doesn't even name the cat, apparently."

With a sigh, Master says this. Then a gentle knock, knock, knock is heard at the door, and I feel disheartened.

It's a clear sign that my naming will be deferred, ans I hear the words I expected.

"The name will have to wait until next time."

Master gets up and opens the door.

It’s disappointing, but it can't be helped. I’ll keep the excitement for later.

For the day when I’ll surely be given a name.

Chapter 46

I Want to Know Everything About Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 141

Miyagi had been sticking close to me a lot more lately.

Today was no different.

But she was still in a bad mood.

"Sendai-san, are these really the only options?"

"I do have others, but I'm only bringing out skirts."

Miyagi frowned.

It was the day of our promised Sunday outing.

Laid out on my bed were three skirts that had survived Miyagi's wave of complaints—some were too short, others too long, or she didn't like the colors.

I never thought she'd actually let me dress her up like this.

We were going out for dinner in the evening, and since I had time to kill until then, I figured it'd be better to spend it with someone than alone. So I invited Miyagi to hang out, and when she asked what I wanted to do, I told her I wanted to either do her makeup or dress her up.

I hadn't forced her to choose or anything, and I was ready to drop it if she said no—but she agreed to let me dress her up, and now she was sulking for no reason.

"How about the one in the middle?"

I pointed to the flared midi skirt, feeling just a little sorry for it under Miyagi's gloomy stare.

"No."

"Then do you just want to go out without wearing anything?"

"That'd just make me a pervert."

"If you don't like that idea, then just pick one already. I can bring out a few more if you want to compare."

It wasn't like I absolutely had to see Miyagi in a skirt or anything, but it had been a while, and I wanted to see her in one again.

And if there was even the slightest chance she might actually wear one, then I wanted to take it.

"… I'll just go with the one in the middle. I'll change into it now, so get out."

She muttered and gave me a push, like she was shooing me away.

I knew that if I said something dumb like, "What if I stay and watch?" the whole dinner plan would probably get canceled on the spot, so I obediently stepped out of the room.

She'd been a lot more straightforward lately.

If it were anyone else, I wouldn't think much of it—but this was Miyagi.

Considering everything that had happened up until now, her honesty was almost unnerving.

The weather had been unusually hot for May, so maybe the heat was starting to mess with her head.

I leaned against the door.

My skirt, longer than the one Miyagi had chosen, fluttered lightly.

June was just around the corner, and July wasn't far behind.

As the temperatures continued to rise, maybe Miyagi would start acting even stranger.

Or maybe that wasn't such a bad thing.

I liked her rebellious side, but I also wanted her to be more honest and open, too.

"Okay, I'm done."

Just as I was thinking something Miyagi would probably kick me for if she found out, I heard her voice and opened the door.

She was wearing the flared skirt and an irritated expression to match.

Standing in front of the bed, she looked even more displeased than she had before changing.

I was honestly surprised someone could look more annoyed just from wearing someone else's clothes than someone who'd just been splashed by a passing car on a rainy day—but there she was, wearing the skirt I picked out.

"That really suits you. You look cute."

"You don't have to say stuff like that."

"Isn't it normal to say what I think? While we're at it, should I pick out a top for you too?"

The thin sweatshirt she was already wearing matched the skirt just fine, but I wanted to enjoy the chance to dress her up a little more.

"No, I'm good like this. Let's just go already."

Her voice was rough.

"Where do you want to eat?"

I wanted to dress her up from head to toe, do her makeup, and doll her up as much as I could—but the only goal today was to have dinner together.

Trying to do anything more would only end with her getting annoyed and making things more of a hassle.

"Let’s go to the family restaurant nearby. I don’t want to go anywhere far."

Perhaps feeling self-conscious about the skirt, Miyagi kept glancing at her legs.

"Sure, let’s go there then."

We left the room and headed toward the front door.

After putting on my shoes and opening the door, I felt a tug on my clothes.

"What shoes should I wear?"

Miyagi asked with a troubled look.

"Sneakers should be fine."

"Okay."

She took a pair from the shoebox and slipped them on.

I looked her over again, head to toe, and told her she looked cute.

She pushed me out the door.

We headed down the stairs together and started walking toward the nearby family restaurant.

As we walked together in our skirts, I thought back to our high school days.

We hadn’t really walked around together much in our uniforms, but having Miyagi by my side now, both of us in skirts, reminded me of the time we’d spent together after school.

Miyagi didn’t say a word.

We walked in silence.

There were all kinds of sounds around us—cars passing, kids shouting—and with all that noise, the silence between us didn't bother me.

The streets were hot for May, with no breeze at all. I felt uncomfortably warm, but Miyagi looked completely fine.

She walked quickly, even though we weren't in a rush.

I felt like reaching out and grabbing her hand to slow her down.

But I stopped myself before I did.

Instead, I just matched my pace to hers.

Things were going smoothly as they were, and there was no point in grabbing her hand only for her to shake me off.

Before I knew it, we'd arrived at the restaurant.

Even if we finished eating quickly, there would still be plenty of time left to do other things.

That was, of course, only if Miyagi was up for it.

"What are your plans after we eat dinner?"

I asked Miyagi, who was still walking quickly.

"I'll think about it after I eat."

She gave me an unsatisfying answer as she walked into the family restaurant.

We glanced over the menu for a while and then placed our orders.

We talked a little about our lives at university, and a little about my job.

Miyagi mostly listened, but whenever I asked her about herself, she'd tell me about her classes or what kinds of books she'd bought recently. It wasn't exactly a lively conversation, but considering she hadn't talked this much since high school, I didn't mind. Once the conversation died down, we finished eating quickly and ended up

back home about an hour after we'd left.

"So, have you decided what you want to do now?"

I asked as I took off my shoes at the entrance.

"Can we go back to your room? I want to give you back your skirt."

"Sure."

As I thought, Miyagi really had been acting strange lately.

She'd started coming into my room more often, sitting down right next to me. She was almost always in a bad mood, but no matter what she said, she always seemed to want to stay close.

And even now, she wanted to come to my room.

I had no idea what was going through her head.

But either way, I was happy about it.

"Should I bring us some drinks?"

I asked, pausing in the shared living space to look at her.

"I'm fine."

She gave a curt reply, and we headed to my room.

I turned on the lights and considered switching on the air conditioner. It was hot enough to justify it, but it was still only May.

Even if the temperature said it was fine, running the AC this time of year somehow felt wrong, so I left it off.

"Sendai-san."

Miyagi called out to me from where she was sitting on my bed.

When I sat down beside her, she kicked my leg, so I had no choice but to sit on the floor and look up at her.

"What is it?"

"Lick my foot."

"It's been a while since you've asked me to do that. But no, you're not allowed to order me around anymore."

There were no more five-thousand-yen bills between us.

Now, we were just roommates.

"It's a punishment, Sendai-san. If I hadn't reminded you, you would've completely forgotten our promise to go out for dinner."

"I was just a little late in keeping it. That's all. I would've remembered even if you hadn't reminded me."

"Okay, fine. Then consider it an exchange for me wearing this skirt."

Miyagi said in a low voice.

She was clearly in a worse mood than before we'd gone out.

"For putting on a skirt?"

"Yeah. I did exactly what you wanted and let you turn me into your dress-up doll, so now it's your turn to do what I say."

I see.

So that's why she'd agreed to wear the skirt so easily.

Only now did I realize why Miyagi had agreed to my request, despite all her complaints.

She probably hadn't intended for me to lick her foot from the very start, but she was definitely trying to get me to do something in exchange.

"Fine, you can give me orders. But I'm not following any weird ones."

"You're saying that now? But you've done it so many times before, Sendai-san. Didn't you say you liked my legs, too?"

Miyagi said something completely uncute while wearing such a cute outfit.

She kicked my shoulder, then crossed her legs.

The hem of her skirt fluttered slightly, drawing my eyes to her legs.

I thought back to our high school days—what it was like being in her room.

My hand instinctively moved to reach out, wanting to touch her, but I stopped myself and clenched my hand into a fist.

Now wasn't the time for that.

But Miyagi's attitude told me she had no plans of backing down.

"It's weird that you're not listening to me, even after I did something for you, Sendai-san."

I let out a quiet sigh, low enough that she wouldn't notice.

"… Can I take off your socks?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, then opened them.

After removing Miyagi's socks, I placed my hand on her heel and leaned in.

In front of me was her pale, healthy foot.

I pressed my lips against the top of it.

I kissed it, then kissed the base of her toes, repeating the motion a few times until I heard her voice, firm and clear.

"Lick it properly."

This was exactly the kind of situation I'd wanted to avoid.

The act of licking her foot felt more vivid today than ever.

But Miyagi had insisted for me to do it, and I didn't have any choice.

I brought my tongue to her second toe and licked up to the base.

Her warmth passed through to me, and it felt like my own body temperature was rising too.

I should've turned on the air conditioner, but there was no way I could do that now.

When I rolled the skirt up to her knees, my heart pounded at the sight—something I hadn't seen in a long time.

I slid my hand from her heel to the arch of her foot.

Then, slowly, I traced upward to the base of her toes.

"Sendai-san."

Miyagi's voice sounded displeased, clearly telling me to stop.

So instead, I kissed the top of her foot again, pressed my tongue to it, and traced it up to her ankle.

Then, I left a kiss on her shin.

My heartbeat pounded so loudly, it felt like there was a speaker attached to it.

I took a short breath.

I brought my tongue beneath her knee, tracing along the bone with slow, deliberate movements.

My fingers slid up her calf, stroking the back of her knee, and her leg jerked in response.

She started to pull away, as if trying to escape, but I gripped her calf tighter and ran my tongue up along the bone.

When I reached her stiff knee, I gave it one last kiss before pulling

my face away.

"Keep going."

She kicked my shoulder.

"I can’t."

"Why not?"

"I just can’t. I’m done."

"You can’t just decide that on your own."

"I’ll keep going if you let me lick other parts of your body."

"That’s not what I told you to do. Keep licking my foot."

Miyagi said in a sulky tone, uncrossing her legs and setting her foot down on my thigh like she was urging me to continue.

I was trying to hold it together.

But I couldn’t anymore.

It wasn’t simply a matter of the screws holding my rationality coming loose anymore.

It felt like my entire sense of reason was starting to break apart.

Those screws, already loose to begin with, had fallen out and rolled somewhere into the room—hiding, waiting to be found.

But I had no intention of looking for them.

My sense of restraint was melting like ice, and in this sweltering room, it didn’t feel like it was going to solidify again.

I pushed Miyagi’s legs aside and stood up.

"What are you doing?"

I heard her voice.

After a moment of hesitation, I placed my right knee on the bed. I put my hand on her shoulder and gently pushed.

As expected, Miyagi resisted. She refused to let her back sink into the bed.

"Miyagi. Let me push you down."

"Absolutely not. You're thinking weird things again, Sendai-san."

Ever since we started living together, we'd sometimes talk or eat meals together, all while keeping things strictly at the level of roommates.

I kept trying to convince myself that I was okay with that.

"You're right. I'm not denying it."

I'd always had impure thoughts. Sometimes, I even dreamed about them.

That was why I told her I didn't want to follow her order.

Lately, Miyagi had been acting strange.

And now that she'd given me an order like this, this was where it had led us.

This twisted desire was something Miyagi herself had nurtured in me.

She couldn't pretend it had nothing to do with her, not after letting things go this far.

I had tried to turn her down.

She was the one who ignored it.

So in the end, this was her fault.

"Get off me."

Miyagi said firmly.

"And if I do? What then?"

"I’m going back to my room."

"Hmm. Then I’m not moving."

"Get off me already."

She spoke in a low voice, glaring at me.

But she didn’t push me away or try to escape.

Maybe it was because she trusted that I wouldn’t do anything she truly didn’t want.

And I did want to respect that trust—at least, that’s what I thought.

"— Miyagi."

My voice came out hoarse.

I wanted to take things slow.

I wanted to wait until Miyagi felt comfortable enough to invite me into her room.

But I wasn’t sure I could wait that long—not for a day that might never even come.

I wanted to rush toward Miyagi—fast enough to cut through anything in my path.

"Please, I’m begging you. Let me get away with what I’m about to do."

Our eyes met for a moment.

Then, I tried to push her down again.

I Want to Know Everything About Miyagi (II)

Part 142

I pushed Miyagi's shoulder gently, barely applying any force.

Yet her back sank into the bed with such ease, it felt like all the resistance she'd shown earlier had been a lie.

"… What are you going to do?"

Miyagi asked, looking up at me, her gaze searching for an answer.

"Will you let me do what I'm about to do if I tell you the truth?"

I asked, combing my fingers through her hair.

As I picked up a strand and brought it toward my lips, she pushed me away by the forehead.

"Of course not."

"I know. That's why I'm begging you."

"… Sendai-san. You and I are just roommates, right?"

"Yeah, we are. That's what we've been, and that's what we'll be from now on, too."

"Liar. What you're trying to do isn't something roommates usually do."

"Isn't it fine for roommates to do stuff like this?"

The word roommate just meant we lived under the same roof. It didn't define what we could or couldn't do together. No matter what I was about to do, that label wouldn't change.

I knew it was a weak excuse. But if the word "roommate" was

something Miyagi still needed to hold onto, then I wanted to let her keep it.

"— What would you do if I said I wasn't going to let you?"

The truth was, I still wanted to keep going, even if she said she wouldn't let me.

But if she were really, truly against it, I'd probably stop.

I could deal with her being angry or cold toward me, but I didn't want her to hate me or reject me.

"Then I'll never try anything like this again. Not while we're living together, and not even after we stop living together. Never."

"You say that, but you always break your promises, don't you?"

Miyagi said, staring at me with an unreadable expression on her face.

"I won't. I swear on your earrings."

I said, touching one of her small silver earrings—piercings I had made in her earlobes myself with these very hands.

I pressed my lips to that special and important accessory and whispered into her ear.

"I promise."

"You're making another half-hearted promise again, aren't you? You're always so quick to come up with lies, Sendai-san."

"Did it sound half-hearted? Besides, isn't this exactly what you got those piercings for? I swear I'll never break this promise."

I kissed the earring again and gently bit her earlobe.

Miyagi brushed a hand through my hair, then traced along my ear with her fingertips.

She touched my earlobe, as if feeling for an earring that wasn't there.

Then, gently, she pushed me away by the shoulders.

I took that as a sign she wouldn't allow me to do I was about to do —and pulled back.

"… The lights."

Her voice was so quiet, I almost didn't catch it.

"Huh?"

"Turn off the lights."

Just as I was about to give up, she said something I never would've expected.

I was at a loss for words as I got off the bed. I turned off the lights with the remote on the table, leaving only the night light on—but Miyagi angrily told me to turn that off too, so I did. The room was plunged into complete darkness, and I quietly returned to her.

"Miyagi."

In that darkness, where even her outline seemed to melt away, I reached out to touch her. She didn't respond as I slowly inched closer. When I stroked her hair with my fingers and kissed a few strands, Miyagi grabbed the front of my clothes.

I kissed her forehead, her cheek, and her ear, one after another.

Being in this complete darkness made it feel like we were cut off from the world.

But I knew that, outside this apartment, there were countless people still going about their lives.

We weren't alone in the world.

Still, right now, this moment, this space—we had it to ourselves.

There was nothing to interrupt us like last summer.

And even if something like that were to happen again, I had no

plans to stop this time.

That was how I truly felt, but hearing how quiet Miyagi was beneath me made me uneasy.

"Hey, even if someone rings the doorbell or calls us, I'm not going to answer—and I won't let you answer either. But if you want me to stop right now… I still can. Miyagi, can I keep going?"

I asked her one more time, before the last of my sense of reason melted away.

"Sendai-san, shut up. If you're going to do it, then be quiet and do it already."

She answered coldly, then bit into my neck. Pain ran through my shoulder, but she seemed to be holding back. It didn't hurt enough for me to complain like I usually did. Her teeth sank deeper into my skin briefly before letting go. In return, I bit her lower jaw, but she pushed me away by the shoulder, and I dug my teeth into her neck instead. She pushed again, like she didn't want me doing that.

When I moved away, I felt a little dizzy—the sweet scent of her shampoo was different than usual, and unusually intoxicating.

I ran my fingers through her hair, dark enough to blend into the night, then traced the curve of her ear. My tongue touched the piercing on her lobe, then slowly slid upward, following the shape of the bone. The moment I slipped my tongue into her ear, Miyagi grabbed a fistful of my hair. Her grip was rough, as always, but there was no real strength behind it.

"That tickles."

She said, sounding annoyed.

"Just deal with it."

I said, continuing to lick her ear, but she kicked me in return.

"Hey, that hurt."

"It's because you wouldn't stop."

"Of course I'm not going to stop. Just be quiet for a bit and accept it."

I softly stroked her ear with my tongue, then bit it gently.

"I told you, that tickl—"

Miyagi gasped mid-sentence as I bit down harder.

I kissed just below her ear and licked her neck.

We'd been walking outside earlier, and my room was hot. Even though we'd been sweating, her skin tasted like nectar. Maybe it was because of her shampoo, but my senses were starting to go haywire.

As if savoring Miyagi's taste, I ran my tongue along the hollow of her neck and gently bit down. I stroked her side over her clothes, slowly sliding my hand downward.

Slipping my hand under the hem of her sweatshirt, I touched her side directly. My palm clung to her sweaty skin; I could feel both her breath and her body heat.

Wanting to feel even more of her, I pressed my hand against her more firmly. Just as I tried to roll up her clothes and reached her ribs, she grabbed my hand.

"I'll get mad if you take off my clothes."

"Don't worry. I won't."

I replied, and she let go of my hand.

I stroked the soft skin just below her ribs.

Even as my hand moved slowly, Miyagi said nothing. But the darkness made it impossible to see her expression.

I wanted to believe she was just embarrassed because her clothes had been shifted, that it was nothing more than that.

I ran my fingers over her belly button, then moved upward, careful not to lift her sweatshirt any further.

When my hand reached her bra, she grabbed my arm again.

"What is it?"

"I told you I don’t want you to take anything off."

"I’m not going to. I just want to touch you."

I whispered, then kissed her cheek.

I did want to take it off. But more than that, I wanted to respect Miyagi’s wishes.

"… I don’t want you to."

She said quietly.

"Even if I don’t take anything off?"

"You’re not allowed to. Even if you don’t take anything off."

Her voice wasn’t cold or sharp, so I couldn’t tell how serious she was.

Truthfully, I wanted to touch her and kiss her everywhere.

Her chest, her back, her waist.

Just… everything.

And I wanted her to let me.

But just because I wanted that didn’t mean Miyagi did.

My desire and her boundaries were at odds, and when weighed against each other, hers came out on top.

"… I understand."

I replied quietly, and her grip on my arm relaxed. I pulled my hand out from under her clothes.

But thinking I might get away with it if I touched her over her

clothes, I placed my hand on her chest, over her sweatshirt.

She grabbed my hand tightly again.

Even though her grip was firm, it didn't feel like she hated it.

Still, I didn't want to be rejected again.

I let out a small sigh, then pressed my lips to her neck and sucked hard. She immediately smacked my back.

"I don't want you to leave any marks either."

I wanted to ask her—who was full of complaints—why she was even letting me do this.

But I knew that the moment I asked that, everything would end.

"Are you okay with kissing?"

I asked, wanting to make sure.

There was no answer.

Taking her silence as permission, I pressed my lips to hers and slipped my tongue into her mouth.

Her soft lips, her firm teeth, and the faint brush of her tongue—I could feel them all. When I nudged her tongue gently, Miyagi responded, just slightly.

Soft, warm, a little stiff—her tongue moved against mine, and I almost forgot how to breathe.

I didn't know why Miyagi was the only one who could melt my reason like this.

I didn't know why I wanted to kiss her so badly.

But still, my body moved on its own—biting, licking, kissing her again and again.

Miyagi's breathing turned uneven, and mine grew shallow too. But it wasn't from being out of breath. It was the pleasure of our body

heat blending together.

Her breaths came in broken intervals, and she was starting to make small, unintelligible sounds.

Hearing her gasp like that only made me more impatient. I wanted to touch her more.

Our lips parted, and I intertwined my fingers with hers.

Maybe because I couldn't see her clearly in the dark, but the sensation of holding her hand felt more intense than usual.

Just touching her like this felt good.

I kissed her cheek, then her ear.

Our fingers untangled, and I rolled her sweatshirt up slightly, placing my lips on her soft stomach.

I kissed every place she would allow, so that the next time we kissed, she'd remember all the places I touched today.

Soft as a whisper, gentle as a breeze, I left no marks behind.

I stroked her hipbone over her skirt, then slid my hand down to pull the skirt up.

Her body flinched, and she pushed me back by the shoulders.

I stopped and looked at her, though I could barely see her in the dark.

But she didn't say no.

"Miyagi."

I quietly called her name, and her fingers dug into my shoulder.

But she didn't say anything. It didn't feel like she was trying to push me away, either.

I could tell she already knew what was going to happen, but she was hesitating.

I understood why she was hesitating. But last summer should've already planted the thought that something like this might happen.

"You'll let me do this, right?"

I asked as gently as I could, and she pulled her hand away from my shoulder.

"You're such a pervert, Sendai-san."

"I'm okay with that."

Her skirt was already half-lifted, so I raised it further and ran my fingers along her thigh.

I knew it was too soon to be touching her there.

But she wasn't letting me touch her anywhere else, so I didn't have any other option.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my breathing.

As I reached for her underwear, I suddenly started worrying about my nails.

I hadn't expected anything like this to happen, so I wasn't sure what state they were in. They weren't long, but I was afraid I might hurt her.

I paused for a moment, and Miyagi's body shifted slightly.

Worried she might run away, I slipped my hand into her underwear. I had never touched someone else in a place like this before—of course I hadn't—and naturally, I was nervous. My body, which had been moving on its own until now, suddenly slowed down, like it had run out of battery. I gently moved my hand lower and found a place on Miyagi that felt warmer than anywhere else I'd touched.

My fingertips met something wet and slick.

My heart was beating so hard it felt like it might burst.

My head was just as hot as the place I was touching.

I hesitantly moved my fingers, just a little.

"Mm—"

A small, quiet whimper slipped from her mouth, and I froze. It didn't sound like her usual voice. It startled me so much, it felt like my heart nearly jumped out of my chest.

"… I don't think I want this… after all…"

Miyagi spoke in a voice so soft I could barely hear it.

But the response I felt beneath my fingertips said otherwise. Her body was simply reacting to being touched, and maybe she'd respond the same way if someone else did it, but right now, it was me she was letting touch her.

Miyagi would never understand just how much that meant to me.

Even if she were to say no now, I knew I wouldn't be able to stop.

"— Just tell me when you really can't take it anymore."

I traced my damp fingers along Miyagi's most sensitive spot, stroking it slowly.

She didn't make another sound, but her breathing grew heavier, syncing with the movement of my fingers.

I was feeling the heat of her body in a way I hadn't before. It was hotter than anywhere else I'd touched today—so hot it felt like my fingers might melt. Even my own breath was starting to burn, catching in my throat.

I pressed down with the pad of my finger. Miyagi's body shifted slightly. Something slick clung to me—something that felt like the mingling of our emotions—and it made me want to explore her further, in places untouched by anyone else.

If I just slid my finger a little lower, I knew I'd reach a part of her I'd never known before.

Her ragged breath brushed against my cheek, my ear.

Feelings I didn't even know I had started to surface, threatening to spill over, and I forced my hand to stop.

"Sen…dai-san…?"

Miyagi called out in a hoarse voice.

That unfamiliar tone pulled at me. It made me want to slip my fingers into the place that would lead deeper into her, but I was scared.

If I did that, I felt like Miyagi might run away.

"Are you okay?"

I asked quietly, and she tugged at my clothes in response.

I still couldn't see her face clearly.

I didn't want my hands to be pushed away just because I wanted to know everything there was to know.

I started moving my hand again, but only touched her in the places I was allowed to.

I at least wanted her to call me "Hazuki" at times like this.

I knew that was a wish that would never come true, but I wanted to hear her say "Hazuki" in that rare, sweet tone I almost never got to hear, and I wanted her to let me call her "Shiori."

And if she didn't want that, then I wanted to pry open her tightly closed lips and clenched teeth, just to hear the voice she was holding back.

But I knew none of that would happen or be allowed.

And if that was the case, then I should've just been happy with what I was given.

I understood that.

But I still wanted more.

I wanted to see Miyagi change under my touch.

I wanted to hear the sounds she'd make just for me, to mess her up —to keep messing her up, from now on, forever.

I wanted her to forgive me for thinking things like that.

The part of me that was aroused by Miyagi and the part of me that was trying to hold back were starting to blur together.

The room was hot. Miyagi's body was hot. And all I could feel anymore was the sensation at my fingertips.

Not knowing what else to do, I whispered "Miyagi," instead of "Shiori," into her ear.

She didn't answer with "Hazuki."

Even so, I called her name over and over again.

My voice was hoarse—raspy to the point I could barely recognize it as mine.

But as I kept saying her name, she tugged hard on my clothes.

"Shut… up… Be quiet… already…"

Her voice was broken and breathy in my ear, and her body pressed close against mine.

She had probably just pulled me in so I'd stop talking. Nothing more.

Even so, her body was so hot I could feel it even through our clothes. It felt like she wanted me, and that alone made me happy.

"Let me hear more of your voice."

I said out loud, hoping that at least one of my wishes could come true.

"… Don't… want… to…"

Her voice was so quiet, like she was trying to suppress her emotions, that I had to concentrate just to catch every word.

"That's fine. Just keep saying that."

"Shut… up…"

That whisper, soft enough to melt into the darkness, made my ears tingle.

Just hearing Miyagi's voice like that made me feel like I was going insane.

"… I'll stop talking. So call me "Hazuki.""

"Don't… want to…"

"Then it's fine if you don't want to say anything. Just kiss me."

As I leaned in closer, Miyagi pressed her hand to my shoulder. But there wasn't any strength behind it. Then, as if giving in, she pressed her lips to mine.

I don't think she kissed me because she wanted to. She probably just didn't want me to see her face, even if she knew I couldn't really see it in the dark anyway. Still, the second her lips touched mine, my breath nearly stopped.

Our lips brushed several times, and then she grabbed my shoulder.

Her breathing grew heavier, and I could hear sounds from her that she could no longer keep down.

I thought I remembered everything from last summer clearly. But with time, even those details had started to blur. Now, they were being overwritten by Miyagi's voice, her scent, her warmth.

One by one, the missing pieces were falling into place.

That vague dream I kept having was being completed.

And I knew I'd dream about this Miyagi again and again from now on.

Each time, I'd probably regret it.

Each time, the Miyagi from today would replace the fuzzy memories from the past.

But I couldn't stop myself because I'd always wanted to know how she'd sound, how she'd respond in a moment like this.

As I pressed more firmly with my fingers, Miyagi bit down on my neck.

Her teeth sank into my skin, and it hurt.

But I figured this pain was her way of showing how good she was feeling. When I thought of it that way, it took my breath away, and I almost wished it would hurt even more.

Her teeth dug in, without holding back, and I felt like I could faint. I was the one touching her, and Miyagi was the one who was supposed to feel good. But somehow, it felt good to me too.

I wished this moment would last forever.

But then, the pain faded, and I heard her strained voice.

"S-Sen…dai…san…"

Just from that broken voice, I could tell that Miyagi was nearing her limit.

I didn't want it to end. I wanted more. I wanted to keep going.

But I stopped my hand, trying to shake off the urge to draw it out even longer. Then, I changed the rhythm of my fingers.

Miyagi grabbed my shoulders.

Her grip was tighter than anything I'd felt from her before.

But before it could turn painful, her body loosened.

All that remained in the room were our ragged breaths, echoing quietly.

The sound of her breathing, the warmth radiating from her, and everything else I could feel from her body felt so good that I kissed her. I pressed a soft kiss to her lips, brushed her lower lip with my tongue, and she accepted me without resistance. But the moment the tip of my tongue touched hers, she pushed me away.

"It’s too hot."

She muttered, her breathing still uneven. As I pulled my fingers back, she pushed me aside and stood up.

"Miyagi—"

Before I could ask where she was going, I heard her mutter, “Ouch,” after bumping into the table.

"Do you want me to turn on the lights?"

I asked, but realized immediately that I didn’t have the remote with me.

"I can do it myself."

"Okay. The remote’s on the table."

I turned on the night-light, and Miyagi came back with the platypus-shaped tissue box in her arms. I sat back down on the bed as she pulled out some tissues and gently wiped my hand.

She was erasing the traces of herself from me.

She wiped my fingers down, more carefully than usual, with her head lowered so I couldn’t see her face clearly.

"I’m going to take a bath… I need to wash myself."

Miyagi said, standing up and turning her back to me.

I wanted to stop her. But I didn’t know what to say.

Having skipped not just one, but two or three bases before touching Miyagi the way I did made me feel uneasy about the way things progressed.

"Miyagi."

I called her name, and she stopped in front of the door.

I still didn't know what to say. But I felt like I had to say something.

"Are you okay?"

I asked her the same question I'd already asked several times today.

She quietly answered with, "Yes," before shutting the door behind her. Just like that, Miyagi was gone.

Chapter 47

The Side of Sendai-san I Didn't Know, and the Side of Me I Didn't Know (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 143

I realized I still hadn't given Sendai-san her skirt back.

I noticed in the changing room of the bathroom, but there was no way I was going back to her room now. I stripped off my clothes and stared at my reflection in the mirror.

There wasn't a single mark on my skin—proof that Sendai-san had listened to me.

I touched my neck.

There shouldn't have been anything left behind, yet it still felt like there might be a mark there. Not just my neck—every place her lips had touched felt like something was still there, and even if I wanted to think about something else, I couldn't.

Her voice. Her breathing. The feel of her hands.

Everything from just moments ago lingered in my head, consuming my thoughts. For hours—no, days. A week, or maybe longer. However long it was, I knew I'd be thinking only of her, and I hated it. I didn't want her in my head, intruding on my thoughts. I knew what was going to happen if I let Sendai-san do whatever she wanted to me, but no one told me it would take over my mind completely like this.

I let out a slow breath, pulled off my underwear, and stepped into the bathing room.

Noticing the tub was empty, I turned on the shower.

"That's cold—"

Water had come out of the spout, so I hurried to stop it from wetting my feet. Even if it was hot for May, I wasn't planning on taking a cold shower. Cooling my head might not have been a bad idea, but the heat had already left my body and my breathing was steady again.

Everything's fine.

I'm fine.

I quietly inhaled and exhaled.

Today wasn't like the last day of summer vacation—a day with any special meaning. It might have been worth remembering, but unlike last summer, I probably wouldn't be able to remember the exact date.

Still, there was no excuse for what happened today.

That summer day could've been chalked up to a whim or the heat of the moment, and before winter break, when she'd seen my chest, that had been the result of our deal for her to help me study. I could even come up with an excuse for when I touched Sendai-san myself during winter break, too.

But today was different. It hadn't happened on a whim, and we hadn't made any trades either. I knew what was going to happen and chose not to refuse. I knew what she was about to do, and still let her do it anyway.

I wasn't completely satisfied with what happened, but I accepted it because it was my own decision.

What caught me off guard was… myself.

I didn't think I'd make those kinds of sounds, or that my body would react like that.

And…

I didn't think it would feel that good.

I thought I knew myself, but apparently I didn't.

I turned on the water, tested it, and waited until it was just right before running it over my body.

I'd never done anything like this with anyone else, so I couldn't tell if it would feel the same with someone else. But I'm sure—probably—it felt good because it was Sendai-san. And that's something I wish I'd never found out.

When I first started paying her five-thousand-yen for her time, we'd promised we wouldn't have sex. I wasn't sure if what we did today counted as sex, but we'd definitely crossed a line. If I'd known I'd react the way I did, I would have never agreed to let her do whatever she wanted.

I had thought maybe someday I might've allowed something like this to happen, but it wasn't supposed to be today. And yet, when she said she'd never do anything like this again if I didn't agree, and swore on my earring, my resolve wavered.

"… What am I going to do tomorrow?"

I shut off the water.

Sendai-san now knew exactly how I reacted to her touch.

Of course she did—she was the one touching me.

I was the one who created the opportunity, but I didn't want her to know I'd react like that. If I could erase her memories, I would, but I didn't have that kind of magic.

Since we lived together, I couldn't avoid her forever, even if I tried to change my schedule around. And it wasn't like I never wanted to see her again.

"… This is the worst."

The way she said my name earlier was nothing like how a roommate should. Each time her voice grazed my ear, it sent a shiver through me, so much that I had to stop her. Yet I still wanted to hear it again, though that would mean reliving everything we'd done today.

— No way.

I couldn’t imagine showing her that side of me again.

I also wanted to know what kind of sounds she’d make if I touched her, but I doubted she’d just let me.

The thoughts racing through my head weren’t normal. I wasn’t in my right mind. I didn’t even know what kind of face I was supposed to make when I saw her tomorrow. I was starting to wish tomorrow would never come.

"You’re so stupid, Sendai-san. You’re an idiot. A total idiot!"

You were the one who said we were just roommates.

That’s what she’d called us on graduation day. Ever since we moved in together, she’d been nothing but my roommate, and things were supposed to stay that way for the next four years. But what happened today wasn’t something roommates did.

I couldn’t imagine how today would change our relationship.

The word “roommate” was like a ticket that let us live together for four years. If that word disappeared, it felt like this lifestyle of ours would end before the four years were even up.

I’d be fine if she wasn’t around anymore, but if she wasn’t, I’d end up thinking of her all the time.

I’d find myself wanting to know everything I’d have no way of knowing.

She was on my mind even when she was here. If she were gone, I wouldn’t know what to do. That’s why, even though we should’ve ended things on graduation day, I chose to keep going. But I didn’t know how to handle these thoughts.

I washed my body, put on my sweats, and left the changing room.

She wasn’t in the shared living space.

I poured myself a glass of barley tea and took it to my room.

After drinking half, I moved the black cat from the bookshelf to my bedside and laid down.

Sendai-san was on the other side of the wall.

I wondered what she was thinking right now.

Today, we both discovered something new about each other—a side of her I hadn't seen before, and a side of me I didn't even know existed.

I wasn't sure if it was a good thing that I'd gotten to know this side of Sendai-san, though. Maybe it was something I'd regret later, or maybe I wouldn't. Right now, I couldn't imagine anything ahead of me.

But what I couldn't stand was that I was the only one feeling embarrassed. It felt like I was the only one left with these emotions.

I pressed my lips to the black cat's forehead.

I hate this.

I didn't want to think about her this much.

I'd rather be thinking about school, or Maika, or anything else. But at the same time, I felt oddly unsatisfied now that the warmth from before was gone.

This wasn't like me at all.

I wasn't planning on falling asleep yet, but I squeezed my eyes shut.

Naturally, she appeared in my mind, and I let out a quiet sigh.

The Side of Sendai-san I Didn't Know, and the Side of Me I Didn't Know (II)

Part 144

"So, what happened?"

Maika asked the moment I stepped into the room.

Normally she'd ask if I wanted something to drink before getting to the point, but today she didn't even think about that.

"Can I put my bag down somewhere before I start talking?"

"Sure, but don't forget you promised you'd tell me everything."

"Yeah."

I set my bag down next to the table and sat on the edge of the soft rug. I'd come over to Maika's place many times since university started, but I felt nervous about the question I had to answer.

"Okay, now tell me the reason. Is it really because you guys got into a fight?"

She wanted to know why I'd brought such a big bag to campus and why I was staying over at her place. When I'd asked earlier in the lecture hall if I could crash at her place, I'd said I'd fought with my roommate, but Maika didn't seem convinced.

There was no way I could tell Maika I'd run away from Sendai-san because of what had happened yesterday. I'd told her I was living with a relative, so bringing up Sendai-san's name would only complicate things.

"Well, a lot of things happened, so I guess you could call it a fight."

To my surprise, my heart ached at how poorly I'd told that lie. I didn't want to hide things from Maika, but I wasn't confident I could explain how Sendai-san and I became roommates while keeping

everything we'd done secret. And I didn't have the courage to tell her the whole story either.

I was always like this—lacking the courage to even look Sendai-san in the face in the morning and the courage to eat dinner together at night. So I left the house before Sendai-san woke up. I knew running away wouldn't solve anything, and it wasn't that I didn't want to see her, but I didn't know what face to make or what to say anymore.

"That's what I'm asking you about. What do you mean when you say "a lot of things happened"?"

Maika forced a smile and added, "Remember, I'm letting you stay over even though my room is so cramped."

Just like she'd said, her place wasn't big. It was a single-room apartment, but it was always kept neat and organized, so it never felt too cramped. It didn't seem like a big deal to have me over, but as the person staying, I couldn't talk back, and I definitely owed her an explanation. Still, I couldn't find the courage to tell her about yesterday, let alone that Sendai-san was my roommate.

"We really did just have a fight."

I decided to stick to the lie.

"You're not the sort to get into fights with other people, though, Shiori."

"Well, they're family, so I kind of went too far."

"So you were at fault then?"

"Hmm, I don't think anyone's really at fault. I just wanted to cool my head a bit."

"Hm, I see," Maika said as she studied me. I wasn't sure if she was convinced.

"How long do you think you'll need to cool off?"

"Just a little while."

"If you're going to stay here, tell me exactly how long you'll need."

Maika's tone turned serious.

"… Two, maybe three weeks?"

"Don't you think that's a bit long?"

"What about one week? Or three days—I'm fine with either. Please, just let me stay."

"It's not about that. Two or three weeks, it doesn't matter, but the longer this drags on, the harder it'll be for you guys to make up, you know? The sooner you go back, the better."

Her voice was firm but soft; she wasn't refusing me, she was worried for my sake. The little prick in my chest felt like a stake being driven in.

"… I understand."

Given what had happened yesterday, I thought Sendai-san might understand if I stayed away for a day, but the sooner I went back the easier it would be. Still, I kept thinking about her.

What had she thought when she'd found I wasn't there this morning?

Was she thinking of me at school?

Was she hoping something like that might happen again?

All those questions ran through my head, and my emotions wavered, so I stayed over at Maika's instead of going home.

"Well, think it over. For now I'll bring us something to drink, so just stay put."

Maika stood and opened the fridge.

As she opened the refrigerator, I was tempted to ask what one should do if they had a physical relationship with their roommate. But I knew that if I did, I'd have to first explain who my roommate really was and how it happened before getting any advice, so I set the thought aside and lay down on the rug.

"Do you want plum or orange juice? Apparently the plum's a new product."

Maika came back with two cups as I was still laying around.

"I'll take the orange juice."

I said, sitting up when I heard the cups being placed on the table.

"… Shiori."

"What is it?"

"The person you fought with—or the person you live with—are they actually your boyfriend?"

Maika sat down with an unusually serious look on her face.

"Why would you think that?"

"You're not denying it."

"No, I am denying it."

"Yeah, now you are. How suspicious."

"There's nothing suspicious about it."

After taking a sip of orange juice, I added, "I'm not living with a boyfriend," and she responded with a flat, "Hmm."

It didn't seem like she believed me at all.

"What, so you didn't get these piercings for your boyfriend?"

Maika said jokingly as she reached out and gently touched my earlobe.

It tickled, so I pulled away and replied, "No, I didn't," and she let go.

I glanced at Maika's fingertips, still curled as she chuckled to herself.

Sendai-san had touched my ear before too, but it felt completely different from when Maika did.

I brushed my hand against my own ear.

It went without saying, but it was also different from when Sendai-san touched me.

Her hands were unlike anyone else's.

On Sunday, Sendai-san's hands were—

As I began recalling yesterday, I quickly took another sip of my orange juice, swallowing it down along with the memories welling up.

Sendai-san had invaded me more than the piercings ever did, and if I let my guard down, she'd keep appearing in my mind.

"This tastes really good. Want some, Shiori?"

Maika put her cup in front of me, and the pale, see-through liquid inside swirled gently. Since she'd said it was plum flavored, I noticed a light, tart fragrance wafting up from it.

"I'm okay."

It wasn't that I disliked plums, but I handed the cup back to Maika anyway.

"I see."

Just as Maika finished speaking, my phone rang. I reached into my bag, and on the screen was yet another message from Sendai-san.

"Did something happen this morning?』

It was the same question she'd already asked countless times today.

I didn't want to see Sendai-san so soon, but at the same time, I really wanted to see her right away.

Unable to sort out my feelings, I shoved my phone back into my bag

without replying.

"Is that from the person you had a fight with?"

"Yeah."

"Are you sure you don’t want to go home today?"

"Please let me stay for tonight."

"You can stay as long as you want, but you guys really should make up soon."

I wasn’t sure if Maika believed me, but her voice was gentle and kind as always.

"Okay."

I hesitated, then pulled my phone out again.

"Sorry, I’m not going home today.⌟

I didn’t want Sendai-san to worry, so I sent the bare minimum and put my phone away again.

Volume 5 Extra

Greeting Sendai-san With a "Welcome Home"

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 144-extra

I hadn't been alive for that long, but today felt like the most unsettling day of my life.

The reason for that was simple: everything around me was new.

I was surrounded by an unfamiliar bookshelf, an unfamiliar bed, an unfamiliar closet, and an unfamiliar view outside my window.

This new room I'd just moved into didn't really feel like it belonged to me.

Maybe if I opened up some of my boxes full of things from my past and took everything out, it would help make the room feel more like mine. But I'd just moved in today, and I didn't really have the energy to do that yet.

"Ahh, what do I do?"

I said a little loudly, at a loss for ideas.

Sendai-san, who would normally be home right now, still hadn't come back yet.

I felt a little bad about it, but I was the one who had asked her to leave the apartment.

I'd asked her to leave simply because I couldn't deal with both the movers and Sendai-san at the same time, and if I could only handle one, then I had no choice but to get Sendai-san out of the apartment. She'd said, "You can just pretend I'm not here," but I felt too nervous about interacting with someone else in front of her, so I ended up searching for an excuse to make her go.

It was easier to have her leave until I was done moving everything in.

I sat down on my new bed that I'd bought for this room.

But it felt so strangely different that I stood right back up.

This bed, which was technically mine but didn't feel like mine, hammered in the reality that I was living in a new place now. I frowned, then dove back into the bed, burying my face in the pillow. It smelled different from the pillow I'd always used. Even when I looked up, I couldn't escape that new smell, because everything in this room was new. I couldn't help but feel like I was already starting to regret moving in here.

On graduation day, I was the one who'd chosen to live with Sendai-san.

Although she was the one who'd given me two choices, in the end I was the one who put the necklace I'd given her back around her neck, and chose the cherry blossom–colored envelope. I had hesitated a little, but ultimately I was the one who decided to share a place with her.

But right now, I couldn't help feeling anxious.

About this unfamiliar room.

This unfamiliar furniture.

This unfamiliar scenery.

And finally, even the familiar Sendai-san.

Everything here felt new, and the optimism I'd had before moving in had already been replaced by unease. I couldn't help but feel like I just wanted to run away.

Ever since my mother disappeared from my life, I'd lived with only my father—but he was hardly ever home either. To me, "home" had always meant a place where someone else technically lived, but never actually came back to.

But this new home was different.

It was a place where there would always be someone besides me here, and that person would come home every day.

Sendai-san wasn't here right now, but she would be back soon. She would eat her meals here, study here, and read her books here. And sometimes, she'd probably come and talk to me. I'd be spending my days here with Sendai-san, either in the room next to mine or in our shared living space.

I knew that—but it still felt so different from the life I'd always known, and it made me uneasy.

A home where someone would actually come home to… that was something I'd never had before.

Not that I wanted to go back to how things used to be.

I turned my body and lay on my back.

There would be no more mornings or nights spent alone here anymore.

I wouldn't feel scared about getting up in the middle of the night anymore, afraid that someone might be standing behind me. I'd feel at ease knowing Sendai-san was just in the room next to mine. For the next four years, I wouldn't have to live in fear of the dark.

Promises weren't absolute and could easily be broken, but it should be fine as long as I kept my expectations in check.

I closed my eyes tightly for a moment, then opened them again.

Sendai-san was the kind of person who always pushed the final decision onto me, and sometimes she lied to me too. But I'd come to accept that that was who she was, so I was prepared. Since becoming roommates with her was never something I'd expected, it didn't matter if it ended sooner than I thought. If I just told myself that and braced for it, I should be able to handle whatever happened. Even if I ended up living alone, as long as I thought of it as something inevitable, I'd be fine.

I sighed and stared at the ceiling.

It felt like there were more good things than bad about moving into this new place, but my anxiety kept making me search for every possible negative outcome.

This wasn't good.

I didn't feel like it, but maybe I should clean up my room. Lying around doing nothing only filled my head with thoughts I didn't want.

I stood up, and among the many cardboard boxes I had, I opened one labeled "stuffed animals." I pulled out a crocodile tissue box cover and a stuffed black cat.

I placed the crocodile tissue box cover under my table.

I needed a tissue box for it, but I didn't have any in the boxes I'd brought. I figured if I asked Sendai-san, she'd probably have one lying around, but since she wasn't here, I decided to just leave the empty crocodile cover where it was.

I placed the stuffed black cat plush on my bed, but paused to think for a moment.

This was my room, but unlike before, there was a chance someone else might enter. I doubted Sendai-san would come in without permission, but still, it was possible.

"I'll put you right here."

I said as I moved the black cat plush onto the bookshelf.

On the otherwise empty bookshelf, the black cat now sat alone.

It looked lonely, so I gave its head a little pat and comforted it, saying, "I'll bring some books over for you."

"Which box were they in…?"

After checking through the cardboard boxes, I found the one labeled "books." I opened it and placed some of my favorites on the shelf behind the black cat plush. Just then, I heard a knock at my door.

"Miyagi."

I heard Sendai-san's voice from the other side, and I opened my door slightly.

"I'm home."

I wasn't sure why, but she spoke with excitement in her voice.

"Welcome home."

I answered, using a phrase I almost never said to anyone, and stepped out into our shared living space.

I closed the door behind me and looked at Sendai-san.

Back at my old home, where my father never came back, I'd never had a reason to say "Welcome home." I used to say "I'm home," even when no one was there, but I almost never said "Welcome home."

Those words still hadn't really sunk in for me.

But they weren't words I disliked.

Unlike yesterday, when it felt like there was no one who needed to hear them, now it felt like there was. That alone seemed like one of the reasons I'd moved here, and it didn't feel like a bad thing. The "Welcome home" Sendai-san had said to me earlier, when I first arrived, wasn't something I disliked either. It made me feel like this was where I belonged.

There were still so many things in this new place that I hadn't gotten used to, but it didn't feel like a bad thing that saying "I'm home" would be answered with a "Welcome home."

"How's your room looking, Miyagi? Do you think you'll be able to unpack everything by yourself?"

"Yeah, probably. At the very least, I have my bed set up already."

I hadn't opened most of the cardboard boxes I'd brought yet, but I could sort through them slowly. There was still some time before classes started.

"Do you need any help with unpacking?"

"I'm good. You should focus on setting up your own room, Sendai-san."

"I'm almost done with mine, so I'm happy to help you with yours."

"It's fine. I can do it myself."

It wasn't like I had anything I needed to hide, but I wanted to organize and put everything away myself. I'd asked Sendai-san to organize my bookshelf once before, but this was different. Since I was essentially building my room from scratch, I wanted to be the one to do it.

"Can I see your room?"

Sendai-san asked, pointing at the door behind me.

"No. I'm not done cleaning everything up yet."

I had no intention of letting her in while the room was still filled with nothing but cardboard boxes. Even if I were to let her in sometime, it'd have to be after everything was organized and put away.

"Oh, right. Where'd you set up your bed?"

Sendai-san asked with a smile.

"Why do you ask?"

"I was just curious. I set up my bed next to that wall. What about you?"

The finger Sendai-san had used to point at my bedroom door earlier was now pointing at the wall separating my room from hers.

"Mine's against that wall too."

I didn't have any particular preference for where to put my bed, but somehow I felt it'd be better to have it close to someone else, so I ended up placing it against the wall next to Sendai-san's room.

"Maybe we'll be able to converse through the walls at night."

Sendai-san said, spouting something totally ridiculous.

"That'd probably be a nuisance to our neighbors, so let's not do that."

"I was just kidding. It'd be a pain if we disturbed the neighbors and they filed a noise complaint against us."

Sendai-san took a seat in a chair in our shared living space, still smiling. Then she looked at me and said, "Somehow, this all feels so weird."

"Why does it feel weird?"

"Because I don't have to go back to my old home anymore."

"… You don't want to go home anymore, Sendai-san?"

"Yeah. That's exactly why I'm here."

"… You're not going to visit at all in the next four years?"

"I'm not going back ever."

The conversation stalled, and Sendai-san's voice faded. Since I didn't really have much to say either, silence fell between us, and I felt a little uncomfortable.

"Sendai-san, do you have any tissue boxes?"

Feeling that the silence would only make things worse, I blurted out something I'd just remembered I was missing.

"Yeah, I have some in my room. Do you want me to bring one?"

"You don't have to do it right now, but if you have any extras, could you give me one?"

"Sure. I'll get it for you later."

Sendai-san said kindly, and the silence returned once more. We

were just former classmates turned roommates. Nothing major should've changed between us, but I still felt at a loss whenever we were together.

"Oh, right! Should we celebrate you moving in today?"

Sendai-san spoke up, probably feeling the same way as me.

"We don't have to do that… I just want to stop by the convenience store."

This felt impossible to deal with.

Rather than staying here and putting up with this awkward atmosphere, I'd much rather be outside.

"Was there something you needed to buy at the convenience store?"

"I just wanted to get something to eat."

"If that's the case, why don't we go out for dinner together?"

"I'm okay with convenience store food."

There was no point in going outside if I wasn't going to be alone. If she came along, we'd just be bringing this awkward atmosphere with us, and it wouldn't be any different than staying here.

"I see. Then how about I come with you? You don't know where the convenience store is, right?"

"I do. I saw it on the way here."

"You might still get lost, though."

"I won't. I'll get you something even if you don't come with me. Is there anything you want to eat, Sendai-san?"

"I'll only know what I want once I see it for myself, so I'm coming with you."

Sendai-san stood up, smiling.

No matter what I said, she was dead set on coming along, and I

wasn't happy about it. I didn't have to go to the convenience store, so I could've told her to go alone while I stayed home instead, but if I said that, she'd probably back down and decide not to go at all, and we'd be back to square one.

Even though we hadn't seen each other in a while, Sendai-san was as annoying as ever. But it was just like her to be this way.

"Miyagi. Today marks our first day as roommates, so why don't we go out together?"

Sendai-san said with a grin, completely unwilling to back down.

I didn't really like celebrating dates, and I really didn't like that she'd made some special commemoration on her own.

"Today's just like any other day."

"Well, even if it is, it's pretty normal to go to the convenience store together on any other day, too, right?"

"… I guess that's true."

Sendai-san was blocking all my escape routes, and I was at a loss for words. I started to feel like the villain for refusing something as simple as going to the convenience store with her.

"Well, that's settled, then. I'm going to grab stuff from my room, so wait for me."

Sendai-san headed back to her room.

She was pushy as always.

Even after graduation, she still made me choose things when the answer was already decided for me from the start.

I let out a sigh.

Though my new life seemed filled with things to worry about, I felt a bit relieved seeing Sendai-san act the same way she always had. I wasn't sure if our life together would be smooth sailing, but if possible, I wanted to spend our days together the same way we had in high school.

 But I wasn’t confident we’d be able to do that.

I went to my own room and grabbed my bag, then walked back into the shared living space, closing my bedroom door behind me.

I placed my hand on my door.

"I’ll be off."

I mumbled softly before taking a seat in a chair Sendai-san had picked out and waited for her.

Chapter 48

What I Know About Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 145

I'd expected Miyagi not to be here when I woke up the next morning.

I hadn't thought she'd be gone the entire day, but knowing her personality, I wasn't too surprised when she was.

What I hadn't expected was for her to be gone for three whole days.

"I thought she'd be back a lot sooner than this."

I muttered with a sigh as I poured myself some orange juice.

I'd figured I would give her a day to cool off and then she'd come home feeling a little awkward, maybe a bit sheepish. But now that it was the fourth day and Miyagi still hadn't returned, unease began to creep in.

I could understand how hard it would be to face me—the person who was just her roommate—after doing something that roommates usually didn't do. Even I didn't know how I was going to face her. I knew it would take time to get used to, but three days was far too long.

I picked up my cup and headed back to my room.

I wasn't too worried about where she was.

"I bet she's been staying over at Utsunomiya's place."

I drank half my orange juice before setting the cup down on the table.

I'd texted Miyagi earlier, asking if she was at Utsunomiya's, and

she'd simply replied, "Don't worry about me." That made me even more certain I was right. If she hadn't been there, she would've said something like, "I'm not at Maika's place."

At times like this, I felt relieved knowing Miyagi had somewhere to go. But I had mixed feelings knowing she was with Utsunomiya.

It wasn't that I thought there was anything between them.

Even so, I wasn't exactly happy about it either.

Still, it was better than not knowing where she was or whose place she was staying at.

But if she didn't come home soon, it felt like Utsunomiya might end up becoming her roommate instead. And that would be a problem, so Miyagi needed to come back.

I flopped onto my bed.

I'd already washed the covers and sheets, but even so, I could still catch traces of Miyagi's scent. I didn't regret what had happened on Sunday, but I did sort of regret that it happened in my room. Now, whenever I lay here, my mind went straight back to that day.

How Miyagi had been here. How I'd touched her, kissed her, and gone even further—

The memory burned vividly in my mind. And with Miyagi gone, those memories kept replaying themselves, uninvited.

If we'd gone right back to eating together like usual or spending time together as normal roommates, I could've locked those moments away and contained them to my dreams. But with her absence, there was no guilt here to hold me back, and my imagination ran wild.

I hated this.

Even as I worried about her not coming home, my thoughts kept circling back to what happened on Sunday.

I slapped my cheek lightly, then reached for my phone.

I'd sent Miyagi messages earlier, asking when she'd be back, but there were no notifications waiting for me. Still, I checked, just in case.

As I'd expected—no reply.

My lectures were about to start, but I had no motivation to go to campus today.

I'd thought about it a few times since she'd left, but now I was seriously considering going to her university. I didn't know where Utsunomiya's place was, but at least I knew where their school was. If Miyagi was staying with her, that probably meant she was attending classes properly too. Maybe I'd run into her there.

But I hesitated.

I knew it would be better to see her in person rather than be trapped with the Miyagi that lived in my memory. And I wanted to see her. But I didn't know how to face her. Between the two of us, it was probably harder for me to treat her like just a roommate again.

The reason was simple, though it was something I didn't want to admit.

Even now, I still wanted to pretend I hadn't realized it.

But I knew.

I'd known for a long time.

That I was in love with Miyagi.

I couldn't pinpoint when those feelings had taken root, though "taken" wasn't quite the right word. It was more like they'd slowly eaten their way in. At some point, she had slipped past my guard, rooting herself deep inside me before I even realized it. By the time I noticed, the feelings had grown too large to rip out. So I shoved them into a dark, cramped corner and hid them beneath the flimsy cover of a five-thousand-yen bill, doing my best not to look.

Even if something stirred those feelings, I could pretend they didn't exist simply by ignoring them. That never changed, even when Miyagi—who hadn't even been a friend—became my roommate.

Even after graduation, when the five-thousand-yen lid was gone and those feelings that had been breathing quietly in the corner of my heart began to make themselves known, I still wouldn't let myself look.

Until Sunday happened.

By touching Miyagi in a way I never had before, the emotions I'd been hiding and ignoring for so long burst open and shoved themselves right in my face.

— Sendai Hazuki was in love with Miyagi Shiori.

Now that I'd realized it, there was no going back.

Even now, she was all I could think about.

I knew she'd never let me do it again, but I wanted to touch her, kiss her, hear that voice no one else had heard before. If I were to see her while holding these feelings, I doubted I could treat her like a normal roommate again. Not knowing how to handle these emotions, part of me was relieved she wasn't here. But at the same time, I hated this part of me that used my feelings as an excuse not to look for her.

Whether she was here or not, my thoughts were always in disarray because of her.

She really is quite the pain, I thought to myself.

If she came back on her own, I'd have no choice but to force myself to sort through my feelings and pretend to act like a normal roommate again. But at this rate, it didn't seem like she was going to come back out of her own volition.

I got out of bed.

I wished I'd asked for Utsunomiya's contact information before we graduated from high school. Miyagi wouldn't listen to me no matter what I said, but if it were Utsunomiya telling her to come home, she probably would. Still, with no way to contact her, the only option was to visit Miyagi at her school.

"Come on, most people would've come home by now."

I muttered, pacing my room and checking my phone again.

I took a deep breath in, then let it out.

I sent Miyagi another message, asking when she'd be back.

I decided to wait until noon. If there was still no reply, I'd go to her university.

I couldn't just waste away here, skipping all my lectures. The longer I waited, the more awkward it would get. I wasn't sure if I'd run into her, but if I was going to try, it had to be today. Even if I couldn't find Miyagi, I might at least run into Utsunomiya.

When I'd touched Miyagi on Sunday, I'd realized she accepted me more than I'd thought. I doubted she hated me—if she had, she never would've let me do something like that to her. That was the only thought I could cling to right now.

I set my phone—still empty of notifications—down on the table.

Then I flopped back onto my bed and closed my eyes.

But the moment I did, Miyagi appeared in my mind again, and I let out a quiet sigh.

What I Know About Miyagi (II)

Part 146

If Miyagi didn't reply by noon, I'd go find her.

That was what I had decided on, but noon slipped past in the blink of an eye, and now it was nearly two. I still hadn't heard anything from her.

I lay in bed, glaring at my phone. I'd promised myself I'd only wait until noon, which meant I should've been getting up and heading out already.

I still had work today.

Skipping lectures was one thing, but I couldn't skip work—not with a student waiting for me. If I kept stalling here, waiting for a message that wasn't coming, I'd be giving myself no time to go and look for her.

But even knowing that, I couldn't bring myself to leave. The thought of actually seeing Miyagi again made my stomach twist. I wasn't sure I'd be able to talk to her normally, or even look her in the face.

And if she were to notice that, she might misunderstand and think I regretted what happened on Sunday. I wouldn't be able to handle that.

But if I tried to clear it up by telling her I liked her, it might seem like I was trying to use those feelings to excuse what I'd done to her on Sunday. That wouldn't capture how I really felt at all. And besides… if I confessed, Miyagi would almost certainly disappear again.

"Yeah, no way."

I muttered to myself, stood up, and glanced at my phone again. Still no reply. Frustration welled up, heavier than my actual desire to see her.

"Miyagi, respond to me already!』

I fired off another message, laced more with irritation than hope. The screen stayed dark, as expected. Time dragged on, uselessly, until finally I forced myself out the door.

The afternoon sun was bright but not unbearable, a few clouds drifting in an otherwise clear sky. I walked quickly to the station, boarded a train, and sat with my phone silent in my bag. Even as the car rocked and rattled, it didn't make a sound.

I pulled it out anyway, but as I thought, there was still nothing. The urge to get off at the next stop and turn back was strong, but somehow I made it all the way to my destination.

Dragging my feet like they were made of lead, I walked toward Miyagi's university. Eventually, the campus came into view, and I paused in my tracks.

"… Come to think of it, I never really looked anything up, did I?"

I knew where the school was—I'd checked back when I was apartment hunting—but I hadn't bothered to research the campus itself. I'd been too preoccupied with Miyagi, and nothing else. With a sigh, I pulled out my phone and searched what I could.

"I really hope I can find her…"

I knew this before I even left the apartment, but a large, crowded university campus was really no place to be looking for someone. Even at my own university, it was almost impossible without knowing their schedule or having a way to contact them.

I wandered around anyway, weaving through crowds of students, checking the obvious places, but there was no sign of her. For all I knew, she might not have even come to school today.

After nearly an hour, I slumped onto a bench, drained despite having done little more than walk in circles. My phone screen was still blank. I wanted to text her, asking her where she was right now, but if she found out I was here, she'd probably run away. But still, wandering aimlessly wasn't going to get me anywhere.

"Maybe I should just wait by the front gate."

At least then I'd have a chance of catching her as she passed by.

I stood up and started walking toward the gate. The breeze carried a bit of relief, but even so, the heat clung to me. The sky stretched above, infuriatingly blue.

Normally I'd have called it perfect weather, but right now, the brighter it was, the more it irritated me.

I let out a sharp sigh, turning back to search one more time—when a familiar face caught my eye.

"Oh!"

My voice came out louder than I expected it to.

"Utsunomiya!"

"… Huh? W–Wait, what?! Sendai-san?"

I hurried over, grabbing her arm before she could slip away.

"Wha—wait, what are you doing here, Sendai-san?"

Utsunomiya asked, bewildered.

Just as I thought.

Miyagi had told me she'd explained our living situation to Utsunomiya, but if that were true, Utsunomiya wouldn't look so shocked to see me. I'd figured Miyagi hadn't been telling me the truth, but this just confirmed it.

"I'm looking for Miyagi."

I felt a little bad about doing this, but I mentioned Miyagi's name anyway.

"Miyagi… Oh, you mean Shiori?"

"Yep. That Miyagi. Has she been staying over at your place?"

"… Why are you looking for Shiori?"

"Did she not tell you anything?"

"Tell me what?"

Utsunomiya frowned, sounding confused.

Miyagi would definitely be furious if she knew I was spilling this.

But we'd graduated from high school already, so there was no reason for us to be hiding our connection with each other from Utsunomiya anymore. If it caused problems for Miyagi, well, she'd only brought it on herself. She was the one who lied. She was the one ignoring my messages.

"I'm actually living with Miyagi. By the looks of it, I'm guessing she didn't tell you anything about that."

I said, smiling at Utsunomiya.

"She never mentioned it. Is that true?"

"Yeah, it is."

"Shiori told me she was living with a relative."

Utsunomiya frowned again, then sighed before continuing.

"… I never really believed she was living with a relative, but I didn't think her roommate would turn out to be you, Sendai-san."

"So she told you it was a relative, huh…"

"Yeah."

It wasn't a terrible excuse, but it was definitely a lie that could be exposed easily. In fact, that was exactly what was happening right now.

"Why are you living with Shiori?"

It was only natural for Utsunomiya to ask that, but it was the question I least wanted to answer. Considering how Miyagi and I had never spoken at school back in high school, I understood her

curiosity. Still, it was hard to explain. So, I ended up blurting out a lie even more obvious than the one Miyagi had given her.

"I guess it's because we're friends."

"I never believed you when you said this before, but back in high school, when I asked if you and Shiori were friends, didn't you tell me you weren't?"

"Did I say that?"

Of course I knew what she was talking about, but admitting it would only complicate things further.

"You did."

"Oh. Well, no, we are friends."

I hadn't had time to come up with anything better, so instead, I doubled down. Forcing the biggest smile I could manage, I looked at Utsunomiya.

"Okay, but how did you two become close enough to live together? You didn't seem all that close even when we were in the same classroom during our second year."

Her serious tone made it even harder to answer. Miyagi hadn't told Utsunomiya anything about me—not now, not back in high school. I doubted their friendship would fall apart over a few secrets, but I still didn't want to risk being the cause of a rift.

"Well… I forgot my wallet once, and Miyagi ended up lending me money. That's how we became friends."

"This is the first I'm hearing of that. But is borrowing money really enough for you two to become close enough to live together?"

Unsatisfied with my vague answer, she pressed for more.

"Hmm… well, you'll have to get the details from Miyagi."

She was Miyagi's friend—it should be up to her to decide how much to share. I didn't want to ruin their relationship by saying too much, so I pushed the troublesome part onto Miyagi and tried steering the

conversation back toward my original goal.

"Anyway, going back to before. Miyagi's been staying at your place, right?"

"Before I answer that, could you let go of my arm?"

"Oh, sorry."

I released the arm I'd been unconsciously holding onto this whole time. I'd grabbed her to stop her from running, but she wasn't Miyagi. She wouldn't flee just from seeing me.

"Yeah, Shiori's been staying over, but… That means the person she fought with was you, Sendai-san."

"Fought with?"

Her words caught me off guard, and I found myself repeating them without thinking.

"Shiori said she fought with the person she was living with, and that's why she wanted to stay over at my place."

Utsunomiya stared at me as if piecing things together. It made sense—there had to be a reason Miyagi would stay at someone else's place for several days, and she couldn't exactly tell Utsunomiya what had really happened between us. Whatever excuse she'd used, I decided to go along with it.

"Well, I guess we are fighting. We got into a little argument over something trivial."

"An argument? With Shiori?"

Utsunomiya sounded surprised.

She seemed to accept that we might bicker over something small, but "argument" clearly wasn't a word I should've used.

"Yeah, with Miyagi."

"I can hardly imagine Shiori fighting with anyone, let alone having an argument with them. Just what kind of relationship do you two

have?"

The conversation was veering in a strange direction, but my thoughts were elsewhere.

To me, it wasn't strange at all for Miyagi to argue with me. But the Miyagi that Utsunomiya knew wasn't like that. Which meant the Miyagi I knew and the Miyagi Utsunomiya knew were two different people. I'd known that for a while now, but hearing it said aloud stirred a strange mix of superiority and irritation in me. A tingling sensation ran through my chest, as though someone had brushed a hand against my heart. My fists clenched on their own.

"We're just roommates. But more importantly, can you tell Miyagi to come home soon?"

"She's at school right now. Why not tell her yourself? If you're willing to wait, I can call her over."

"That won't work. She'll definitely run away the moment she sees me. That's why I want you to ask her for me."

"… Was your fight really that bad?"

"I guess you could say that."

"Then that's even more reason to talk face-to-face."

Utsunomiya really was a kind person.

Even though she didn't seem to believe everything I said, she was still worried for my sake.

"Yeah, but I can't imagine her doing anything but running if she sees me."

"How about you come over to my place, then? Shiori said she'd be staying over again tonight."

If I confronted Miyagi there, she couldn't avoid me. But I couldn't imagine it ending well. She'd realize I'd exposed her lie, and things would only get worse. And besides—I still wasn't sure I could look her in the eye like before.

"I wish I could, but I have work soon. I'm a private tutor, so I can't just take the day off. I'd really appreciate it if you could tell Miyagi to come home."

This time, I decided to give her the truth, hoping she could convince Miyagi for me.

"You're working as a private tutor? I never would've guessed."

"Really? I'm actually pretty good at teaching, you know."

"Then why not come by after you're done?"

"It'll be late."

"That's fine."

She gave me her address. It seemed I had no choice but to go. I had a bad feeling about it, but at the very least, Miyagi wouldn't treat me coldly in front of Utsunomiya.

"Thanks. Just in case, I'll give you my number too."

We exchanged contact information, and I agreed to visit Utsunomiya's place once work was finished.

Chapter 49

The Path I Walk With Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 147

"Are you sure you don't want to go home, Shiori?"

Maika asked from across the table, setting her phone down and looking at me.

"Yeah."

I knew it would be best to head back as soon as possible. But I couldn't bring myself to do it yet.

On Monday, I'd run away because of the awkwardness left over from Sunday. But now, it was different. The longer I stayed away, the harder it became to face Sendai-san.

"The person you're fighting with is probably really worried about you, though."

"Yeah, I know."

I'd gotten another message from Sendai-san today, asking when I'd come home. She'd been sending me so many texts, all of them full of worry. Each message filled me with guilt, constantly reminding me that I should go home. And yet, part of me couldn't help but wonder what she was doing while I was gone. Probably going to class, talking with friends, living her life as usual. I told myself that was for the best, but still, a part of me wished she'd do something out of the ordinary—like skip work for the day.

I hated myself for wishing for that. I hated that I still couldn't find the courage to go home, that I was burdening Maika by staying here, and that I was turning into a nuisance to her, too.

"You still don't feel like going home? Was it really just a normal

fight?"

Maika asked, her gaze steady on me.

"Yeah, it was."

I said, spinning another lie to protect the one before it. The lies were piling up, and I felt like I was drowning under their weight. Thinking about everything I'd already lied to Maika about, and all the lies I'd probably have to tell her in the future, I knew I should at least come clean about one thing: that Sendai-san was my roommate.

"Shiori."

"What is it?"

"… Do you have anything you want to tell me?"

Maika's voice had turned unusually serious.

"No. Why?"

I sipped my orange juice, hiding behind yet another lie.

"No reason. Well, anyway, you need to make sure you and your roommate work things out somehow."

"Okay."

I knew this couldn't go on. If I kept dragging my feet like this, my relationship with Sendai-san would crumble. Back in high school, she'd always been the one to close the distance between us, even after I dumped popcorn and soda on her, and even when I pushed her out of my apartment after she tried to kiss me. Sendai-san had always forcefully tried to close any sort of distance I tried creating between us.

But this time, it was up to me to close that distance.

It's too late to do it today, so I'll do it tomorrow, I thought to myself.

I took another sip of my orange juice as I held my phone in my

other hand. I wanted to type a message saying, “I’ll be back tomorrow,” but my fingers wouldn’t move. While I hesitated, the doorbell rang, and Maika stood up.

"Oh, they’re here. I need to step out for a bit. Mind waiting here for a bit, Shiori?"

Something felt off about Maika’s words, like she’d been expecting this.

It shouldn’t have been a package delivery, not this late.

"… Is that your friend?"

"Well, they’re not my friend yet."

So not someone who was her friend now, but maybe could be later down the line. I couldn’t imagine who that might be. And whoever it was didn’t sound like they were close enough friends with Maika to just show up this late at night.

Maika’s place was mostly open, so if I shifted my body just a little, I could see the entrance from where I sat. I leaned over, curious about who she was talking to—then froze when a familiar voice reached me.

"It’s fine. I won’t stay long."

I shot to my feet.

The person at the door was the one I most wanted to see—and least wanted to face.

"Well, it’d be a nuisance to the neighbors if we talked out here. Why don’t you come in?"

"… In that case, pardon my intrusion."

Why?

How?

There’s no way. She shouldn’t be here.

My hands and feet went cold.

"I came to pick you up, Miyagi."

Sendai-san said, smiling brightly.

"— Maika…"

I couldn't make sense of what was happening and turned to Maika, who had let Sendai-san in like it was the most normal thing in the world.

"I ran into Sendai-san at school today, so I invited her over."

"… Huh?"

Nothing made sense.

How had they met?

What had they talked about?

How had it come to this?

I had no idea what to say. One wrong word could reveal secrets that were meant to stay buried. In fact, Sendai-san showing up here probably meant at least one of those secrets was already out.

I had no idea how it had happened or what had led to this moment, but the most logical conclusion was that our connection was no longer a secret. I wanted to make a break for it, but Sendai-san and Maika stood between me and the entrance like human barricades.

"You weren't coming home, so I went to your university to look for you. I ran into Utsunomiya there, and that's how I ended up here."

"You just "ended up here," huh…"

This whole situation was a nightmare.

It felt like someone had flipped a switch in my brain. I couldn't think properly or process what was happening right in front of me.

"Sendai-san told me she was looking for you, so when she spotted

me, she came over and I invited her here. You two really need to talk things out."

Maika said, like it was no big deal.

I tried to piece together what they were telling me, but nothing made sense. All I could grasp was that two people who should never have met had somehow ended up talking to each other.

"… Maika, you didn't tell me Sendai-san was coming over."

"That was my idea. I told her not to say anything. If you'd known I was coming, you would've bolted, right, Miyagi?"

She was absolutely right. If I'd known Sendai-san was coming, I would've been long gone. Even now, all I wanted was to get out of here. It was so typical of Sendai-san to read me that well and then conspire with Maika to keep me trapped. I had no idea what or how much Maika had heard from Sendai-san, but I'd always planned to be the one to tell her everything myself.

— Not that I'd ever figured out when that would be.

"I'll explain everything once we get home, so just come with me for now, okay?"

Sendai-san said, still with a smile on her face.

I knew I should go home, but my brain felt like it was lagging three steps behind. While I stood there frozen, Sendai-san walked over and grabbed my arm.

"I—"

I almost snapped at her in my usual harsh tone, but I swallowed the words. We were in Maika's apartment, and she was watching everything. I couldn't risk letting her see how I normally pushed Sendai-san away.

"Let's not just stand around. How about we all sit down and talk?"

Maika's calm voice cut through the tension as she took a seat.

"Also, Shiori, you're awful. You lied to me about living with a

relative."

Her tone was gentle despite the accusation.

"And back in high school, you told me you and Sendai-san weren't close. That was a lie too, wasn't it?"

"… I'm sorry."

It seemed that Maika had found out that Sendai-san was my roommate. I wanted to know what else Sendai-san had told her, but considering all the lies I'd been spinning, apologizing seemed like the only place to start. I felt like I should keep apologizing, but having my lies exposed like this—and seeing someone who definitely shouldn't be here sitting in Maika's living room—left me completely speechless.

"Well, I've got a million questions for later, but right now, why don't you both sit down?"

I couldn't argue with Maika, so I did as I was told and sat down. Sendai-san took the spot diagonally across from me, and Maika cleared her throat.

"Anyway, you two need to make up with each other. Right here, right now."

"What?"

The sudden topic change caught me off guard.

"Don't "what" me. Shiori, you said you and Sendai-san had a fight, didn't you?"

Maika asked, as if double-checking with me, and I nodded, remembering the lie I'd told her.

"I asked Sendai-san to come over so you two could work things out. So talk it through, do whatever you need to do, shake hands, and then head home together."

"Wait, what? Shake hands?"

This time, Sendai-san was the one who sounded confused.

"You don’t have to literally shake hands, but I want you both to leave here on good terms. It would be kind of awkward if Shiori stayed another night."

Maika smiled as she looked at me.

Somehow, the mood had turned strangely peaceful, which should’ve made me feel better, but instead I felt like I was walking on thin ice, like one wrong move would shatter everything.

"Take as long as you need to talk. Should I get you something to drink, Sendai-san?"

"Thanks, but I’m planning to leave soon. I’ll just have whatever Miyagi’s having."

"I’m not sharing my drink."

I said firmly and pulled my half-empty glass of orange juice closer toward me, but Sendai-san reached over anyway. “I only want one sip,” she said, drinking from my cup like it was the most natural thing in the world. Usually, I would’ve complained, but I couldn’t make a scene in front of Maika, so I held my tongue.

"Still, I didn’t expect you to be so pushy, Utsunomiya."

Sendai-san said, setting the cup down and looking at Maika.

"I’m usually not, but this situation called for it. There’s way too much I don’t know, and I’m completely lost. And I know I’m the one who invited you here, Sendai-san, but this whole situation feels so surreal. If you’d told my high school self that the three of us would end up hanging out at my place like this, I never would’ve believed it."

"Nobody could have seen this coming."

"Right?"

Maika agreed with Sendai-san, and I wanted to bury my face in my hands. The whole scene felt so absurd. Even though my own lies had caused this mess, I didn’t want to watch it unravel before my very eyes like this.

"Miyagi, let's just go home. If there's anything you want to talk about, we can do it there."

I found the peaceful yet extremely awkward atmosphere almost unbearable, and yet, I still couldn't bring myself to go home with Sendai-san.

"You can stay over if you want, Shiori. But be warned—if you do, I'll be bombarding you with questions until sunrise."

"Well, you heard her. What's it going to be, Miyagi?"

Faced with two impossible choices, I felt Maika's gaze on me as I finished the last of my orange juice.

"… I'll go home with you."

I said, knowing there was really only one option.

Sendai-san stood up.

"Thanks, Utsunomiya. You really helped me out."

"Don't mention it."

Maika handed me my bags, and I stood up as well.

"We'll be leaving, then. Can we still keep in touch?"

Sendai-san asked in a friendly tone.

"Sure."

Maika responded, matching her friendliness.

I couldn't tell whether the two of them were planning to become real friends or if it was just something superficial, but I was annoyed. It felt like Maika had just stolen Sendai-san from me, and at the same time, it felt like Sendai-san had just stolen Maika from me, too.

Feeling uneasy, I accompanied Sendai-san to the entrance, where she thanked Maika once more before slipping on her shoes.

"Thanks for putting up with me and sorry for staying over for so many days."

I said to Maika.

Sendai-san stepped outside first, and just as I was about to follow her out, I felt Maika's hand grab my bag.

"Shiori, I won't ask about it today, but you have to tell me later why you're living with Sendai-san."

That was the question I'd been dreading.

But I knew it was inevitable. There was no way she wouldn't ask.

"… Okay."

I replied, forcing the answer out of my throat, and stepped outside.

The Path I Walk With Sendai-san (II)

Part 148

Sendai-san and I started walking down the same path I'd been taking with Maika these last few days.

This was the very definition of reaping what I had sown.

Streetlights lit the path, but Maika's words from earlier were still trapped in my head, making the road ahead feel darker than it actually was. I knew I was the one at fault for lying, but I couldn't stop myself from complaining to Sendai-san anyway.

"Sendai-san, what was that about?"

"What do you mean?"

"You told Maika that we were living together, didn't you?"

"Well, of course I did. I didn't really have much of a choice."

"We promised not to tell anyone about us."

"That promise only applied while we were in high school."

Sendai-san said without looking at me.

Even though we were walking side by side, her gaze seemed fixed on something other than me.

"Even so, it was still wrong of you to tell someone about us without asking me first."

I said, knowing full well I was just taking my anger out on her. But when I thought about how she had called out to Maika, I couldn't hold my tongue.

"If anything, you're the one in the wrong here, Miyagi. You never came home, and you never told me where you were. Of course I'd get worried and look for you. Besides, last time I asked, you said

you'd already told Utsunomiya we were living together. So it only made sense that I'd go to her and ask if she knew where you were."

She was right.

She had once asked if I'd told Maika about us living together, and I'd said I had, so it wasn't unreasonable that she'd gone to Maika for help. But she must have known I was lying, and she didn't have to tell Maika the truth either.

I shouldn't have been blaming her.

I knew I shouldn't be pushing the blame onto her or snapping at her.

So instead, I decided to change the subject to something I'd been planning to do, but couldn't bring myself to follow through on.

"I would've gone home even if you hadn't come looking for me."

"And when exactly would that have been?"

"Tomorrow."

It wasn't something I'd fully decided on, but I had thought about it.

"You never mentioned that."

Sendai-san muttered.

She still wouldn't look at me. Her eyes stayed on the ground as we walked. She didn't sound angry, but she wasn't facing me either. I wasn't sure how to face her myself, so in a way, I was relieved she wasn't looking at me. But at the same time, I felt a little disappointed.

"Well, you showed up before I got the chance to message you."

"If you were planning to message me, you should've done it earlier. You really kept me waiting, you know."

"… I'm sorry."

I finally managed to say the words I should've said the moment we left Maika's place, but even then, Sendai-san still wouldn't look at

me.

"I'm sorry for telling Utsunomiya about us."

She said, still staring at the ground.

I had thought I'd be the only one feeling awkward, but maybe she was too. Still, thanks to Maika, who had guided us like a bright streetlight, we'd at least managed to keep a conversation going. Her cheerful presence had kept things from feeling too heavy.

"… Why did you go all the way to my university to look for me, though?"

I knew it was because she was worried, but I asked anyway.

"Like I said, it was because you wouldn't come home."

She mumbled.

She still wasn't looking at me, so I couldn't tell what kind of face she was making. Maybe if I grabbed her arm and called her name, she would've turned toward me. But the chance she might not was enough to make me lose my nerve. So we just kept walking under the night sky toward the train station.

"You didn't have to call out to Maika, though."

I said without looking at Sendai-san, and she quietly answered,

"Well, I ran into Utsunomiya first, so I didn't have much of a choice. I felt bad about it, but I was short on time, and since I couldn't find you, I had to ask her for help."

"… Did you tell her about anything besides us living together?"

"I told her about how you lent me money at the bookstore once. Since Utsunomiya didn't know why we were living together, she kept pressing me for details, so I ended up telling her we were friends. I also said if she wanted to know more, she should ask you. So there's a chance she'll bring it up."

After saying something so irresponsible, Sendai-san walked a couple of steps ahead of me.

I instinctively grabbed onto her clothes.

I knew it was my fault Maika was now asking about my relationship with her, but I hadn't expected Sendai-san to dump everything onto me without explaining anything herself.

"Not only did she bring it up, she asked me to explain why we're living together. I don't even know what to tell her."

"Did you really not say anything about me to her during high school?"

She asked from just ahead of me, as I still held onto her clothes.

"Of course not. We promised not to tell anyone about what we did after school, remember?"

"Well, for some reason, Utsunomiya always thought you and I were friends, so I thought maybe you might've told her a little bit about us."

"Did you ever tell your friends about us, Sendai-san?"

"Even if we hadn't promised to keep it a secret, I still wouldn't have told them anything."

She let out a huge sigh and came to a stop.

I released her clothes, and she finally looked at me.

Under the streetlight, I saw her face, beautiful as always. She wasn't smiling like she often had been lately, but she looked just like she used to on the mornings before school. Seeing her like this made me feel like things between us had gone back to how they'd always been.

"What am I supposed to tell Maika the next time I see her?"

I asked, swinging my big shoulder bag against her.

"Just be honest—tell her how you used to pay me five-thousand yen to order me around, and that led to us living together."

"There's no way I could tell her that."

"Then just say we became friends because you lent me money a few times, and leave it at that."

Her voice sounded brighter than before as she started walking again. The streetlight shining on her and the path seemed unusually bright.

"If I told her we were friends, how would I explain lying to her about us not being friends in high school?"

"Just say it was hard to explain because we didn't have much in common."

"Sendai-san, you're just making up half-baked excuses because you're not the one who has to deal with it. Think harder. I doubt Maika will be mad, but I don't know how she'll react if I give her another flimsy explanation."

"If she gets mad, then apologize. Utsunomiya seems like the type who'd forgive you if you apologized sincerely."

"Of course I'd apologize, and I know she'd forgive me too. But I don't think she'll let me off with another weak excuse."

She was right—Maika would probably forgive me if I apologized sincerely. Even if I gave her a flimsy excuse, she wouldn't force me to tell her more than I wanted to, and she'd probably let it slide no matter what I said. But I'd lied to her too many times when it came to Sendai-san. Normally, Maika wouldn't pry, but I couldn't be sure how it would turn out this time.

"Then just tell her I didn't want Umina and the others to know, so I made you keep it quiet."

"That just makes you the bad guy, Sendai-san."

"I'm fine with being the bad guy."

Sendai-san said nonchalantly as she smiled.

It wasn't fair how she could smile so brightly at times like this.

She was always so kind to me, and somehow, right now, she seemed even kinder than usual.

It made me feel like I wanted to stay by her side like this forever.

"But I'm not okay with it."

I said, pausing to smack her with my bag.

But she didn't stop walking.

"It's fine. That'll explain why you couldn't tell her about us back in high school. We can figure out the rest later—like how we became friends or why we stayed quiet about being roommates."

She said in a gentle voice as she walked ahead of me.

My eyes stayed fixed on her back.

"Hey, Miyagi. Don't just stop walking."

Now ten steps ahead, she turned to face me.

Our eyes met, and my heart skipped a beat.

"Sendai-san, why are you being so nice to me? I would've gone home tomorrow even if you hadn't come looking for me."

"Really?"

"I was going to send you a message, too."

"Even if you had sent me a message, I probably still would've gone looking for you."

Her flat tone gave nothing away, and I had no idea what she meant by that.

"Why would you do that?"

"If I told you I simply couldn't wait another day, what would you say?"

"There's no way you couldn't wait just one more day."

"I wanted to see you so badly I couldn't wait another day, Miyagi."

Sendai-san said in a serious tone as she started walking toward me. One step, then another, then a third. She approached me slowly, then stopped right in front of me.

"You're such a liar."

I said, neither too harshly nor too softly, and she laughed awkwardly.

For some reason, I suddenly felt like I'd done something terribly wrong, and I couldn't bring myself to move.

There was no doubt she'd been worried about me—I could tell from all her messages.

But there was no way she couldn't wait one more day to see me.

Even looking back on everything between us, I couldn't think of a single thing about me that would make her want to see me that badly. I'd always been selfish with her, I'd pushed her away countless times. Even now, I'd run away from her again. It made no sense to me that, despite all that, she still wanted to see me.

"I'm not as much of a liar as you are, Miyagi."

Sendai-san said with her familiar smile.

"It's getting late. We should head home soon."

Her voice was kind and gentle.

But still, my feet wouldn't move.

"If you're not going to start walking, I'm going to hold your hand and drag you along with me."

Sendai-san said, and then she started walking.

I watched her back in silence, but she soon turned around.

"Come on, Miyagi. Start walking already."

"Didn’t you say you were going to hold my hand and pull me along if I didn’t?"

"Quit acting like a kid. You can walk by yourself."

She sighed, but came back anyway. After a moment’s hesitation, she grabbed the handle of my bag and tugged me forward.

We weren’t holding hands, but it at least made my bag feel lighter.

She walked ahead, and I followed as if chasing after the bag she was pulling along.

"Why were you gone so long, anyway?"

She asked softly, now walking beside me.

"… I wasn’t sure how to face you."

"I thought that might be the case."

"Sorry."

I apologized, and she looked at me as she said,

"Hey, Miyagi."

"What is it?"

"Let’s go shopping for earrings together."

"For you?"

"No, for you. I want to buy you a cute pair."

Her voice was soft as she kept pulling my bag.

"I don’t need them."

"Think of it as your punishment. You broke our rule about contacting each other if we were going to stay out overnight, so I want you to accept them."

"I did send you messages, though."

"That hardly counts as contacting me. And if I hadn't messaged you first, you probably would've just come home eventually without saying a word."

I didn't want to admit it, but she was right.

Well, one or two more pairs of earrings wouldn't hurt.

It wasn't like I wanted her to buy them for me or anything. I just didn't have much of a choice.

"… When do you want to go?"

"Whenever you want, Miyagi."

Her gentle voice melted into the night sky.

She walked slowly, and as I matched her pace, it felt like time itself was passing just as slowly.

Chapter 50

I Want to Get Closer to Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 149

It was an unspoken rule that we wouldn't mention what we did on Sunday.

It wasn't something we'd agreed upon or anything, but neither Miyagi nor I had mentioned it once since we came home together that day. We both knew it was a topic we shouldn't bring up if we wanted to live normally with each other, so we spent Friday and Saturday without saying a word about it.

But today, I couldn't help being aware of it again.

It had been exactly one week since last Sunday.

And now, we were spending another Sunday together.

"Do you want some tea?"

I asked Miyagi, who was sitting quietly across the table from me.

"Is it hot or cold tea?"

"Which would you prefer?"

"Cold tea."

"Okay, then I'll get us some barley tea."

I stood up and brought out two cups, adding three ice cubes to each. From the fridge, I took out a bottle of barley tea, and a cool sound rang out as I poured it into the cups.

"Here you go."

I said, placing one of the cups in front of Miyagi before sitting back down.

"Thanks."

Miyagi said quietly, taking a sip.

"Are you not going out today?"

"I already told you yesterday. I'm not."

Miyagi's tone was displeased.

I knew I shouldn't keep asking the same question over and over again, but she wasn't behaving like I expected, so I couldn't help wanting to double-check.

Considering she had run away from home, I thought she'd try to avoid me once she got back, so I expected her to make up some excuse—like going out with Utsunomiya—and leave first thing in the morning. But here she was, sitting across from me without a single complaint.

It wasn't like the awkwardness wasn't there, though.

Sometimes, I found myself at a loss for words more than ever before. And I was sure Miyagi felt the same, because every so often, our conversations just trailed off into silence.

Even so, Miyagi hadn't run away from me these last few days, and we spent Friday and Saturday together the same way we always did. We even had breakfast today, and now we were just finishing up lunch.

"Oh yeah. How'd things go with Utsunomiya?"

Miyagi hadn't mentioned Utsunomiya's name once on Friday or Saturday.

There was no way she hadn't seen her at university these past few days. And if they had talked, there was no way Utsunomiya didn't ask about us. If she had, Miyagi would've come home saying something like, "It's your fault I had to go through all that, Sendai-san." But she never did.

I didn't really want to ask, in case it was something she didn't want to talk about, but since I was involved too, I couldn't help being curious.

"Nothing really happened."

Miyagi said it in a way that made it sound like something had happened.

"Well, it's good if nothing happened, but what did you end up telling Utsunomiya?"

"I told Maika that after I lent you money, I asked you to tutor me, but I was too embarrassed to admit it, so I kept quiet. I also said I didn't mention us living together because then I'd have to explain our relationship in high school, so I stayed silent about that too."

Her explanation was a little rough around the edges, but it was true I had helped her with her studies. It also accounted for her after-school hours, and her grades had improved, which backed up her story.

Still, it felt like a weak excuse for staying quiet.

"Was Utsunomiya convinced by that?"

"I'm not sure, but I know I'll need to actually talk to Maika about it someday… I don't even know where I'd start, though."

I'd imagine it was harder for Miyagi—the one who had been paying to order me around—to explain to Utsunomiya than it was for me, who was simply accepting money from her.

"Well, it sounds like she's willing to buy your story, so things are fine for now, right?"

I knew this only pushed the problem back, but for now, we had no choice but to rely on Utsunomiya's kindness.

"No, they're not."

"Why do you say that?"

"… Because Maika said she wanted to come over sometime."

The fact that Miyagi had kept this hidden until now was probably why she hadn't mentioned Utsunomiya lately—and also why Utsunomiya had gone along with her unconvincing story.

"Why not just have her over, then?"

It felt like this was Utsunomiya's condition in exchange for not prying further.

If that was the case, I didn't see why not.

"No way. She said she wanted to talk to you, Sendai-san."

"That's fine. I want to talk to her too."

"… You do?"

"Yeah, she seems like an interesting person. I feel like we'd get along well."

I hadn't noticed it back in high school, but Utsunomiya seemed like the kind of person anyone could be friends with if they just talked to her. Even if she wasn't, I still wanted to thank her for helping me bring Miyagi home.

"Are you trying to become friends with her?"

Miyagi asked quietly, staring at me intently.

She wasn't frowning, but her gaze was piercing.

"Yeah, I feel like she and I could be friends."

We'd gone to the same high school and even shared a classroom at one point. And since she was my roommate's friend, there was no reason we couldn't be friends too. The only question was whether Utsunomiya wanted to be friends with me, but since she wanted to come over, she was probably at least open to the idea.

"Sendai-san."

Miyagi said firmly. The tone alone told me this wasn't going to be

good.

"What is it?"

I asked, already bracing myself for something I didn't want to hear.

"Maika is my friend."

She said with emphasis, though I hardly needed the reminder.

To Miyagi, Utsunomiya was probably the closest thing she had to a best friend.

It made sense she'd feel uneasy about the idea of me taking her away.

I could understand that.

I could understand, but accepting it was another matter.

I was irritated that Miyagi thought Utsunomiya was so important to her that she didn't want us to have any kind of connection.

"I'm not going to take her away from you or anything."

I said it as cheerfully as I could, not wanting her to realize how I really felt underneath.

I picked up my damp glass of barley tea and drank half of it.

The cool liquid slid down my throat, lowering my body temperature.

My slightly wet hands were cold, too.

But my head wasn't cooling down.

This inexplicable feeling I held toward Utsunomiya—I had always known its name, but pretended not to.

I was jealous of Utsunomiya Maika.

I didn't want to admit I was jealous of the person Miyagi was closest to and spent the most time with. And because I knew Utsunomiya

was a good person, that jealousy weighed even heavier on my heart.

Now that I realized I loved Miyagi, the feelings I'd tried not to notice came to light all at once.

I let out a small sigh.

It was normal for her to want to cherish her friends.

That's what I tried to tell myself, but my heart wouldn't calm down.

I drew in another breath and looked at Miyagi. Our eyes met like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Ever since that day we came home together, it felt like she'd been looking my way more often.

"Sendai-san, I'd like some more barley tea."

Miyagi mumbled, and when I looked at her cup, I saw that all that was left was ice. I stood up, grabbed the bottle from the fridge, and poured it into her cup.

It felt like we were both pushing ourselves too hard.

Normally, Miyagi would've gone back to her room by now. But today, she stayed with me. And instead of holding this plastic bottle, I wanted to be touching Miyagi. But I held back.

I put the bottle back in the fridge and sat down again.

I was at a loss for what to do.

Our relationship should've been deeper than ever, but we were still just roommates. I was the one who decided we could keep calling ourselves that if it was what Miyagi needed. While I was relieved things hadn't changed despite everything, I was also frustrated.

My head was a mess, and I didn't even know where to start sorting it out. Still, one thing was certain: I could feel how happy I was just to have Miyagi by my side.

Even if we were just "roommates," I still wanted to get closer to her.

As I sat back down, I took a sip of barley tea and looked at Miyagi, searching for the right words to keep a conversation going.

I Want to Get Closer to Miyagi (II)

Part 150

The barley tea remained untouched, condensation gathering around the cup.

Miyagi hadn't drunk a single sip from the second cup of barley tea she'd asked for, and she stayed silent.

Our Sunday felt just like any other day, and yet at the same time, somehow different.

"Oh right. When do you want to go out and shop for earrings together?"

I brought up what I thought was a harmless topic, steering the conversation back to something I'd mentioned on Thursday.

To be honest, I was still curious about the situation with Utsunomiya, but I wanted to turn my feelings in a different direction.

"I haven't decided yet."

Miyagi said, brushing the condensation from the cup with her fingers.

"Oh, I see."

"We can just go whenever, right?"

"Yeah, we can. What kind of earrings do you want, Miyagi?"

"Weren't you the one who wanted to decide for me?"

"I do plan to pick them out, but I figured I should at least ask what kind you had in mind."

Her earrings were supposed to be a special reminder of the promises I had made to her, so this was something important to me.

The piercings I'd opened, which had once felt like proof that Miyagi was mine, were no longer the same as they had been back then. But I wanted them to stay meaningful to me for a long time.

That was why I wanted the earrings I gave Miyagi to be something bought with my own money, not my parents' wallet.

Miyagi wasn't the type to want something so expensive that I couldn't afford it with my wages, but I wanted to be able to buy her whatever pair she wanted, even if it was expensive. So I wanted to know in advance if there was anything in particular she had in mind.

I knew that if I told her I would be paying with my own wages, she'd try to tell me I didn't have to and attempt to back out, so I had no intention of letting her know.

"… I don't really have anything in mind, so I'll just leave it up to you, Sendai-san."

Miyagi said coldly.

"Okay, then let me see your earrings."

"Why do I have to show you my earrings?"

"I just want to use them as a reference for what to get you."

Miyagi's earrings were hidden by her hair again today. I already knew what kind she was wearing underneath, but I still wanted to see them anyway.

"I'll show you when we're going shopping."

I wasn't expecting a positive response from her, but I was still disappointed by it.

After a moment of hesitation, I stood up and reached my hand out toward Miyagi.

However, Miyagi pulled away before I could touch her hair. The sound of her chair legs rattling against the floor made me stop in my tracks. My hand, now with nowhere else to go, ended up on the

table, and I let out a sigh.

If it had been Utsunomiya asking, would Miyagi have shown her without a second thought?

As I wondered about it, the feeling that had been simmering within me grew stronger.

I wanted to touch Miyagi.

Until recently, I would have just gone ahead, tucked her hair behind her ear, and looked at her earrings. But the memory of last week was still vivid, and Miyagi's excessive reaction now made me hesitate.

"You didn't have to seem that surprised."

I tried to say casually with a smile on my face.

I didn't want to add any undue pressure to this otherwise calm atmosphere.

But if things went on like this, I felt like I'd never be able to touch Miyagi again.

"I'm not going to do anything weird to you."

I said, then reached my hand out slowly this time.

Miyagi didn't back away.

For the first time in a week, my hand touched her with the actual intention of wanting to feel her. I had grabbed Miyagi's arm when we were at Utsunomiya's place, but at the time, I'd been focused only on getting her home, nothing else.

Even though I was only touching her hair, my heartbeat grew so loud, I felt like even Miyagi could hear it.

I was surprised at myself for feeling this nervous over such a trivial thing.

I combed her soft hair with my fingers, then tucked it behind her ear. I brushed her earring lightly, feeling the firmness of the silver

stud, before tracing her earlobe.

Miyagi seemed like she was about to grab my hand, but didn't.

Our eyes met, but she didn't complain.

Seeing her not grab my hand when she normally would have, or her not launching into complaints like she usually did, made me feel that even though I'd touched her so many times before, what I was doing right now felt more special than usual.

Taking advantage of Miyagi's lack of resistance, my hand grew bolder.

I slid the hand that had been touching her earlobe down to her neck.

I caressed the side of her throat and trailed downward. Her smooth skin felt so good to touch, and memories of last week came flooding back into my mind. Remembering how Miyagi had sounded then made my chest tighten, and all traces of Utsunomiya vanished from my thoughts.

I slowly made my way down to her collarbone.

As I traced my finger over the bone, Miyagi's body trembled slightly. Then, she finally grabbed my hand.

"Don't touch me anywhere other than my ears."

Miyagi said, tightening her grip.

"Okay."

Miyagi pulled my hand away before letting go.

I sat back down in my chair and stared at her.

She still didn't get up from her seat, nor was she shooting glares at me.

And it made my heart beat faster than usual.

These were just little things, but they made it feel like something

was different from usual.

Just like how the sky changed colors between night and morning, it felt like the colors between us were changing as well. But I wanted a change that was more dramatic, something vastly different from how things normally were.

If nothing had changed even after all we'd done together, then maybe there had never been any chance for change at all, no matter what we did. If things stayed the same between us, Miyagi would at least remain here as my roommate until we finished university. But if I tried to force a change in our relationship, she might run away again—and this time, never come back.

"I'm going back to my room."

Miyagi said in a cold tone before I could decide what to do.

"Wait."

"I don't want to."

"Why not?"

"Because it feels like you're about to do something strange, Sendai-san."

Miyagi stood up from her seat.

But I grabbed her arm before she could make her way back to her room.

"What do you mean by "something strange"?"

"Why don't you put your hand on your chest and mull it over?"

If I could put my hand on your chest, I'm sure I could figure out the answer right away.

As that silly thought ran through my head, Miyagi's sullen voice cut through my imagination.

"Sendai-san. Let go."

I let go of Miyagi's arm, but then grabbed her hand instead.

"That's not what I meant."

I knew that, but I just didn't want Miyagi to go back to her room just yet.

My feelings and Miyagi's didn't seem to overlap.

But the reason we could still even be around each other like this was probably because I'd used the word "roommates" to describe us on Sunday. That word felt like such a restriction placed on me, but while I wanted to get rid of it someday, I was hesitant to do so now.

All I wanted at this moment was to go back to the relationship we used to have.

To be honest, I wanted to at least be able to kiss her, but doing that now would take just as much courage as approaching a random stranger on the street.

After thinking for a moment, I chose to do something that Miyagi would probably let me get away with right now, and brought her fingers to my lips.

Miyagi's hand stiffened.

"Would you consider this "something strange," Miyagi?"

She didn't answer, but she didn't try to leave either.

Relieved that Miyagi was still here, I kissed her knuckles.

Her fingers twitched slightly.

I pressed my lips against them firmly, feeling more of the hardness of her bones than the softness of her skin.

"Sendai-san."

Miyagi's voice was sharper than any bone.

It was best not to go further. I should be satisfied with just having kissed her, even if it wasn't on her lips, and let it end here.

I knew that—but I couldn't stop myself. I started running my tongue over her fingers when her free hand brushed against my hair.

Her hand, which normally would have grabbed or tugged at my hair, stayed put, and I cautiously pressed my lips against the back of her other hand.

We'd done this many times before, back when Miyagi used to order me around.

This much shouldn't be a big deal.

I pulled back for a moment, then pressed my lips to her hand again.

I traced her smooth skin with the tip of my tongue. Miyagi tried to pull her arm away, even though this was something she had commanded me to do countless times before. I didn't want her to tell me she didn't want this today, so I held her hand tightly and gently bit her fingertip.

She said nothing.

I wished she would make a sound, even quietly, like she had last Sunday.

I sank my teeth into her skin and touched the pad of her finger with the tip of my tongue. I lightly sucked on it, as if drawing blood from a wound, and Miyagi kicked my leg.

"That's enough, isn't it?"

I heard her mutter, and I released her finger. I looked up and saw a frown on her face.

"See? You did end up doing something strange. You're always trying to do these erotic things, Sendai-san."

"Do you think what I did just now was erotic?"

"Am I not supposed to?"

"Even though this was something you'd ordered me to do so many times before?"

It hadn’t only been her ordering me around—Miyagi had done the same to me before, too. I never thought she’d start calling these things “erotic” now, not after everything we’d already done together.

I’d heard that word from her before, but today it sounded different, as if Miyagi, like me, was tying what happened last Sunday to what was happening between us now.

"You’re so annoying."

She said grumpily, stepping on my toes.

She hit a pressure point, and it hurt more than I expected.

"Does that mean you’d rather I never did this again?"

I asked, pulling my foot free from under hers.

"All I want is for you to reflect on your actions."

With that, Miyagi returned to her room without looking back at me.

Chapter 51

The Distance Sendai-san Chose (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 151

I'd been spending more time in our shared living space lately.

To be more accurate, I was consciously choosing to spend more time with Sendai-san.

That hadn't changed even as we entered June.

"Miyagi, what are you going to do once you're done eating?"

Sendai-san asked as she twirled her mentaiko pasta around her fork.

"I kind of want something to drink."

"I'll brew us some black tea after, then."

Ever since that day, I'd found it hard to go back to Sendai-san's room. She never asked me to come, either. Instead, she lingered in the living room after meals instead of returning to her own room, so if I wanted to be with her, I ended up spending more time here too.

I twirled the last bit of my own pasta around my fork and took a bite.

I didn't want any sort of major changes to my life here.

I wanted to continue living with Sendai-san, and I wanted us to stay as roommates.

And if I wanted that wish to come true, I had to stop running away from her. Even if things felt awkward, being around her was the only way for things to return to how they used to be. Besides, staying away from Sendai-san made me just as uneasy as being with her, so in the end, I had no choice but to stay by her side.

"I'll wash our dishes."

I said as I stood up, noticing that Sendai-san's plate was also empty.

"Thanks. I'll leave it to you, then."

I took both of our plates and utensils away and turned on the sink.

I wished I could let the memories of what happened on Sunday wash away like the running water, but there was no way I could erase them from my mind so easily. The more I tried to forget that day, the more aware of it I became.

The memories kept coming back to me—where Sendai-san had touched me, how she'd whispered to me.

I could easily recall the sensation of her hands and lips, thanks to how many times she'd touched me and kissed me before in the past.

I could tell that Sendai-san was also very conscious of what happened on Sunday, but I doubted she was as worried as I was. If I continued dwelling on it like this, I felt like I wouldn't be able to live with Sendai-san as roommates for the next four years anymore.

I really hope things can go back to normal soon.

What happened on Sunday was already in the past.

I put the clean dishes and utensils away one by one.

The dishes were clean now, and so were the pots.

After washing everything we'd used for dinner, I took a seat back in my chair.

"I'm done washing the dishes, Sendai-san."

"Okay. I'll start brewing the tea now."

Sendai-san said as she stood up.

We didn't always have black tea after our meals. Sometimes we had orange juice, and other times, barley tea. Yesterday, we even had

ice cream together. Our dessert menu changed all the time.

But what we drank or ate didn't really matter.

All that mattered was that we were sitting here together.

"Sorry for the wait."

Sendai-san said as she placed a mug down in front of me.

"Thanks."

As I took a sip of my tea, I glanced over at Sendai-san, who was sitting across from me.

She had the same expression she did yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that.

She was also probably trying her best not to change anything.

The only way to ease the awkwardness between us was to act like nothing had happened. So even though Sendai-san was probably trying to treat me the same way she usually did, I couldn't help but feel a distance between us that was different from before, and it bothered me.

Even though she used to try to get close to me without any reservations, she was holding back now.

I stared at Sendai-san, wanting to know what she was thinking, but just like always, I had no idea.

There was only so much I could tell just by looking at her.

I knew that if there was something I wanted to know, then I needed to put it into words, but it felt too difficult to ask, so I had no choice but to just stare at her.

Even though she acted the same as always, there was something unmistakably different about her.

I couldn't put that difference into words, and I wanted to know what it was. But if I were to ask about it, we'd end up having to talk about what happened on that day.

"Sendai-san, when's your birthday? You said it was sometime in August, right?"

Instead of what I really wanted to know, I asked a question about something else I didn't know.

"Yeah, it is. Why are you asking all of a sudden?"

"It's almost August, so I was just wondering when your birthday was."

I'd been with Sendai-san for a long time now, and yet I had no idea when her birthday was. Even though it was nothing too important, I felt like if I got to know Sendai-san a little better, it might help me get closer to learning what I actually wanted to know.

"It's August 23rd. It's basically at the end of August, so it's not happening that soon. When's yours, Miyagi?"

"September 25th."

I'd refused to answer the same question before in the past, but today I decided to tell her honestly.

If I didn't have to answer Sendai-san's questions in return, I would've rather asked about her family situation rather than her birthday, though.

I remembered very clearly just how upset Sendai-san was when I asked about her home situation last summer vacation. It didn't seem like she maintained much contact with them anymore. I had no intention of prying into her family situation, but I was still curious about it.

The reason I didn't want to ask Sendai-san about her family situation was because I wouldn't be able to answer her questions if she were to ask me about the same thing. I could tell her my birthday, but I didn't really want to talk about my family.

"The 25th, huh? Would that make you a Virgo? Or a Libra?"

"I'm a Libra."

"I see. I heard Libras are supposed to be sociable, though…"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Oh, nothing. I wonder what being “sociable” means."

Sendai-san chuckled.

It was obvious she was trying to say she didn’t think I was sociable.

Fortune-telling was just some arbitrary nonsense anyway.

If everyone’s horoscopes were accurate, that would mean there were only twelve different kinds of personalities in the world.

And with just four blood types, that would mean there were exactly four kinds of people.

"So you’re the type to believe in fortunes, huh, Sendai-san?"

"Well, only the good ones."

She smiled as she took a sip of her tea.

Our conversation carried on until my mug was empty. After finishing a second cup, I placed it on the table and stood up.

"I’m going back to my room."

As I turned my back to her, Sendai-san came over to my side.

"Miyagi."

She spoke softly, taking my hand. Then, she pressed her lips to my fingers.

Probably because I’d let her get away with it once, she’d been kissing my hand whenever I was about to leave for my room. Sometimes it was just a kiss, other times she’d lick my fingers or the back of my hand. I had never told her she could keep doing it, but I didn’t see any reason to stop her either. So I let her do as she pleased.

This much was fine.

She had done it plenty of times in the past, only back then it had been because I ordered her to. Now she was doing it of her own accord.

A wet sensation spread across my knuckles.

She wasn't satisfied with just kissing my hand tonight.

Her tongue, warmer than her lips, slid along my finger and up to my knuckles. The sensation, wet against my skin, dragged my memory back to what happened that Sunday.

This is fine.

I'm okay.

She kissed the spaces between my knuckles, a soft sound escaping with each touch, then brought her tongue to my fingers again.

My hand was growing hotter than her body temperature, so I reached out and tugged lightly at her bangs.

"That's enough."

At my words, she gave one last kiss to the back of my hand, then looked up at me.

It was moments like these when I felt the distance between us most clearly.

Though, I was the one who had run away and created that distance in the first place.

But before I could close it myself, Sendai-san had come to bridge it first. So this time, I wanted to stay by her side, hoping I could erase the distance I'd made. Yet no matter what I did, it only felt like I was pushing us further apart.

The Sendai-san I knew before would never be content with just kissing my hand and calling it a day. These days, she'd stop at random times, and that only made it all the more obvious that something had changed. If she wanted things to stay the same as before, then she needed to act exactly like before, too.

But ever since we came back from Maika's place, Sendai-san had been acting strangely indecisive.

I turned my back to her and left for my room.

Standing before the black cat plush on my bookshelf, I stared at my hand.

Just because Sendai-san had touched it didn't mean it had changed in any way.

It was still just my hand.

I pressed my lips against my own fingers.

But it felt different from when she did it.

I pulled a tissue from the crocodile tissue box, wiped my fingers clean, and lay down on my bed.

The Distance Sendai-san Chose (II)

Part 152

"Shiori, are you free this Sunday? There's a movie I wanna watch."

Maika, sitting across from me, asked as she finished off her chicken nanban.

Sunday of all days?

I sighed internally.

I didn't want to say it, but I couldn't keep quiet either.

"… Sorry, I'm hanging out with Sendai-san this Sunday. Can we do next weekend?"

I answered, my voice mixing with the chatter of the crowded family restaurant.

I hadn't wanted to mention Sendai-san's name, afraid Maika might bring up visiting again, but I couldn't lie to her anymore.

"Oh, sure. What are you doing with Sendai-san?"

"We're going shopping."

I replied before reaching for another piece of chicken karaage.

"Oh? So you two are close enough to go shopping together, huh?"

I couldn't tell if she was smiling or smirking, but either way, Maika looked at me with an oddly happy expression.

"Yeah, I guess."

"You two don't really seem to have the same tastes, though. What are you shopping for?"

"Earrings. Sendai-san said she wanted to pick some out for me."

This Sunday, I was finally going to fulfill the promise I'd made to Sendai-san—a punishment she'd given me the day we came back from Maika's place. I'd been putting it off long enough.

"I see. I guess it has been a month since you got your ears pierced. Still, it feels a little surreal that you and Sendai-san are close enough for her to pick out earrings for you."

Maika said, glancing at my ears hidden behind my hair. Then, as if remembering something, she added,

"Speaking of which, do I have permission to come over sometime?"

So there was no dodging this topic after all.

I swallowed back a sigh, then chased it with a sip of oolong tea.

"Oh, yeah. Sendai-san seemed to be okay with it."

I'd been avoiding the issue since Maika hadn't pressed, but I finally had to give her an answer.

"That's good. I've been curious about what your new room looks like. Am I allowed to come over whenever, then?"

"How about next month?"

"Uh, isn't that kind of far?"

"Did you want to come sooner?"

If possible, I wanted a little more time before Maika visited.

Life with Sendai-san looked normal on the surface, but it wasn't quite back to what it used to be. I doubted it would be even by next month, but at least by then, maybe we could act more like roommates again.

"Yeah, I can do next month."

Maika said easily, as if she wasn't in any rush.

"Okay, sounds good. I'll check with Sendai-san too."

"Got it. I'll probably be free anytime."

Relieved by her lighthearted reply, I ate the last piece of karaage.

The karaage Sendai-san made tasted better than this, I thought as I swallowed the overly seasoned chicken.

"What are you drinking, Shiori?"

After I set down my chopsticks, Maika pointed at the cup in front of me.

"Oolong tea."

"Can I have a sip?"

"… Sure."

"Oh, never mind."

Even though she'd asked, she immediately changed her mind, stood up, and went to the drink bar. She came back with a glass of ginger ale instead.

"Even though you wanted some of my oolong tea, you got something else instead?"

"Well, I didn't actually want oolong tea."

"Then why did you ask for a sip?"

"You don't really like sharing your drink with other people, right, Shiori?"

Maika said with a smile.

"It's not like I don't like it or anything…"

"Really? Even in high school, I never once saw you ask for a sip of someone's drink, or offer yours."

She was right.

I really didn't like sharing drinks with other people.

But I'd realized that always refusing only made things more awkward, so I'd taught myself not to say no every single time.

"Well, it doesn't bother me, so I don't mind if you don't like it."

Maika said cheerfully, sipping her ginger ale.

"… I'm not a big fan of sharing drinks, but it's not like I hate it."

"What about with Sendai-san?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, I mean, you seemed fine with it when it was her. At my place the other day, she took a sip of your drink like it was nothing, and then you drank from it after, too."

Now that she mentioned it, she was right.

Back at Maika's place, Sendai-san had sipped my orange juice, and I'd finished the rest before we left.

It wasn't something so bad that I wanted it erased from Maika's memory or anything, but there'd been no reason for her to see something like that. She seemed to be getting the impression that, for me, Sendai-san was different from everyone else.

But Sendai-san wasn't some special exception.

The only reason I hadn't minded sharing drinks with her was because of all the orders I'd made her do. We'd touched each other so much that sharing a drink didn't feel like such a big deal in comparison.

"I probably wasn't paying attention that day because I was so surprised at seeing Sendai-san show up so suddenly."

I wasn't sure if that was a good enough excuse for letting her take my drink like it was the most natural thing in the world, but for now I needed something. I didn't want to lie to Maika, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth either.

"I see."

Maika said in a tone that didn't sound convinced.

"Oh yeah, have you and Sendai-san been talking since then?"

It was abrupt, but instead of dragging out the conversation, I decided to change the subject.

"Yeah, she's contacted me a few times, mostly to thank me for helping get you back home. Sendai-san's quite courteous."

Sendai-san had never mentioned that she'd been keeping in touch with Maika.

It wasn't something she needed to tell me, but I didn't like it. Rather than hearing it from Maika, I would've preferred to hear it directly from her.

But I knew I shouldn't be thinking like this.

I wanted to know everything Sendai-san did when I wasn't around, and part of me even wished I could restrict her activities somehow. I'd been aware of these feelings since high school, but now they were becoming impossible to ignore.

I sipped my oolong tea and listened as Maika moved on.

Whether she was still curious or not, she dropped the subject of sharing drinks, and our conversation shifted from Sendai-san to school. After several more minutes of rambling, we parted ways.

On the train home, I still couldn't stop thinking about Sendai-san. She was working tonight, so she wouldn't be home until late. I'd thought spending time with Maika would take my mind off her, but in the end I was still thinking about her anyway—wondering what she talked about with her student, what kind of smile she showed her.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

I climbed the stairs to the third floor, opened the front door, and slipped off my shoes.

Sendai-san wasn't back yet.

In my room, I pulled three manga volumes from the shelf. I'd read them before, so I finished them quickly and grabbed more. By the time I was on the sixth volume, there was a knock on my door. I set my manga aside, opened it, and saw Sendai-san standing there.

"Welcome back."

"I'm home. I was going to brew some tea. Want some?"

"Sure, but what about your dinner?"

"I ate a light meal before work, so I'm fine."

She said before heading to the kitchen to make tea. I set out two mugs while she worked, then sat in my usual spot. A few minutes later she placed the mugs on the table and sat down across from me.

"Thanks."

After thanking her, I decided to mention something Maika and I had talked about.

"Sendai-san, Maika said she wanted to come over next month."

"Next month, huh? Isn't that kind of far?"

"Not really. It'll come before you know it. When are you free?"

"Any day I'm not working. You can decide on the details, Miyagi."

She answered easily without even checking her schedule.

Maika's comment from earlier made me incredibly conscious of Sendai-san's mug.

She brought it to her lips, her throat moved, and then she set it back down.

If it were anyone else's drink, I wouldn't have wanted to touch it. But with Sendai-san, it never bothered me—and it still doesn't. I wasn't even sure what I was hoping to find by staring at it, yet just seeing the mug in front of her made my heart flutter.

— It was best not to think about it too much.

Sendai-san and I had nothing in common. If I hadn't run into her at the bookstore that day, and if she hadn't left her wallet behind, none of this would've happened. Because our relationship had such a unique beginning, she felt different from other people. That was all there was to it.

"What's up? Is there something interesting about this mug?"

Sendai-san asked as she examined her mug.

"No, I was just thinking about how good this tea tastes."

I gulped down the rest of the hot tea before getting up.

"Miyagi?"

"I'm kind of tired today, so I'm going back to my room."

"Wait."

She stood up and grabbed my hand before I could leave.

But before her lips could reach my fingertips, I called out her name.

"Sendai-san."

"What is it?"

She stared at me intently, and I stared back at her.

Just like in high school, she wore her long hair in a half updo, the sides braided and pinned back. Back then I'd thought the brownish shade looked out of place in a school setting, but now, as a college student, it suited her perfectly. The short skirts of her uniform had been replaced by longer ones in her casual wardrobe. And while she still rarely buttoned her blouses all the way up, she often wore other things these days, too.

Sendai-san looked mostly the same, but many things about her had changed.

"Give me your hand."

I said, looking at both of ours. She frowned slightly.

"Are you telling me to let go?"

"I'm telling you to let go so I can see your hand, Sendai-san."

"… Okay."

She released my hand and placed her own on top of the one I held out.

She still obeyed me even when I wasn't ordering her.

That much hadn't changed since high school.

I pressed my lips against the back of her hand.

The moment my lips touched her skin, her hand trembled so much it startled me. It didn't seem like she was against it, but I let go instinctively, as if she'd just rejected me.

It wasn't that I had to touch her.

I just wanted to be a little closer.

"Sorry, I was just a little surprised."

She said, flustered, still holding her hand out. When I didn't take it again, she added, "It's okay now."

I took her hand and bit down on her fingertip.

This time, she didn't move.

I bit harder, and her hand stiffened. My teeth sank into her calloused finger until I felt the bone, then I lifted my head.

"That hurt."

She muttered. I looked at the faint teeth marks I'd left. As I brushed them with my fingertip, she suddenly grabbed my hand.

"Miyagi. You haven’t forgotten about Sunday, have you?"

"I haven’t. I just hope you don’t pick out any weird earrings."

"I’ll choose something cute for you."

She said with a smile.

The Distance Sendai-san Chose (III)

Part 153

To me, June didn't feel like spring or summer.

It was a season caught in-between—too late for spring clothes, too early for summer ones. I was never sure what to wear, but one thing was certain: the spring-colored skirt I'd bought after graduation no longer suited the season. So I'd stuck to my usual blouse and long pants.

There was no need to wear a skirt that would only remind me of that Sunday anyway.

"Have you found anything you like yet, Miyagi?"

Sendai-san asked as we stood in front of a row of earrings, as if she weren't the one responsible for dragging me here in the first place.

The shop looked like it specialized in imported goods, with plenty of items besides accessories, but the earring selection was still fairly good.

Sendai-san had told me, "If you see something you like, I'll buy it for you, so take a look," so I'd been browsing. But nothing really caught my eye. And since she was the one who had insisted on choosing earrings for me in the first place, I had assumed she would be the one making the decision—not me.

"I'm fine with anything, so you pick, Sendai-san."

"Are you really okay with anything?"

"Yeah."

If she'd dragged me somewhere full of overpriced jewelry, I would've left without hesitation. But the earrings here weren't expensive enough to feel guilty about.

"Okay, how about these?"

Sendai-san asked, immediately holding out a pair of silver earrings as if she'd known what she wanted to choose from the start.

"… I'd prefer something else."

My brows furrowed. The price was fine. That wasn't the issue.

The problem was with its design.

"Do you hate them?"

"Not exactly, but they're way too cute."

They were small flower-shaped earrings—plumeria, according to the tag.

If I wore them, it'd look like little blossoms were blooming from my ears. They were cute—but not on me.

"Really? I think they're pretty simple and not overly cute."

"I'd just rather have something different."

"I see. Then how about these?"

She pointed to a pair of gold earrings. They were big, flashy, expensive—everything I disliked.

"Too gaudy. You picked these knowing I'd say no, didn't you?"

"You're the one who said you'd be okay with anything. So those are your only two options. Which do you want?"

Sendai-san said, flashing me an amused look.

It was true—I had told her to pick something out, and I'd even confirmed I was fine with anything when she asked. If I threw a fuss, she'd probably choose something else for me, but making a scene in public felt far too embarrassing for a university student.

"… These ones."

I said at last, handing her the flower earrings.

"Okay, I'll pay for them right now. Wait here."

She said, then headed for the register.

I touched my ear.

My fingertips brushed against the earrings I was already wearing—different from the ones Sendai-san had just picked out. The pair she'd first pierced into my ears were the very first I'd ever worn, so the thought of them being replaced made me feel a little sad.

My eyes drifted back to the row of earrings in front of me.

I'd never been all that interested in earrings, so it wasn't like I had a preference. Since I couldn't find a pair that felt right on my own, it was only natural to go with the ones Sendai-san picked.

"Thanks for waiting."

While I was still absentmindedly staring at the earrings on display, Sendai-san came over and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Where are the earrings?"

Sendai-san seemed like she was in a good mood, but she wasn't holding the earrings she'd just bought. They were probably put away in her bag, but I'd assumed she would've given them to me right away.

"I'll give them to you once we get home. Anyway, do you want to go anywhere else?"

"No."

"You don't want to get something to eat? Well, I guess it might be a little too early for that, huh."

Normally, Sendai-san would've suggested a whole bunch of places to stop by and decided on somewhere to go, but today, she simply said, "I guess we should just go home, then," and started walking. We went back the way we came, and without making any detours, made it back home by evening.

I opened the refrigerator and poured out a cup of barley tea and another one of soda.

"I'll bring these to my room."

Sendai-san said as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and placed the two cups I had intended to put on the table onto a tray instead.

"Wait, you want me to go to your room?"

"Yeah. I'll give you the earrings there."

"Can't we do it out here?"

"You don't want to come to my room?"

It wasn't like I minded going to her room or anything, but I hadn't been there since that Sunday.

Her room was connected to the things we did there that day, and it made my heart beat a little faster.

I didn't want to erase those memories or anything, and I'd accepted whatever we did in her room that day as well, but the embarrassment still lingered. But if I were to keep avoiding Sendai-san's room like this, I felt like I might never be able to bring myself to go back there again.

"… I'm fine with it."

I answered quietly, and Sendai-san smiled as she picked up the tray of drinks.

I opened her bedroom door and stepped into her room. Her bed immediately entered my vision, and I stopped in my tracks.

I felt like Sendai-san was being unfair.

She wasn't the one who had been touched last time, so unlike me, there was no reason for her to feel embarrassed.

We definitely should've just done this in the shared living space.

"Have a seat."

Sendai-san said as she placed the cups on the table before giving me a tap on the shoulder, but I didn't want to sit down.

"Where are the earrings?"

"I'll put them on for you."

Sendai-san pulled me toward the table and forced me to sit down. Then, she sat down next to me.

"I can put them on myself."

"You should at least let the person who bought these put them on for you. Or is there a particular reason you don't want me to?"

"I just don't like the idea of it."

I didn't want her to touch my ears because it'd remind me of that Sunday again.

That was the only reason.

But if I were to tell her that, she'd find out just how conscious I was of that day, so I didn't want to say it.

"Well, if that's your only reason, then just let me put them on for you."

Sendai-san said exactly what I'd expected her to say and reached her hand out toward me, but I brushed it away.

"At least let me take these earrings out myself first."

I removed my current earrings and placed them on the table. I felt my own earlobes for a moment, feeling a little uneasy without any accessories in.

"So, can I put them on for you?"

Sendai-san asked as she took out a small bag from her purse and looked at me.

"Fine."

"Do you want to take the earrings out of the bag, at least?"

"No, you do it, Sendai-san."

"Okay."

She said in a gentle tone as she removed the earrings from the bag. Then, she tucked my hair behind my ears.

Her gaze pierced my bare ears. I'd seen my own piercing holes many times before, but this was the first time I was showing them to Sendai-san, so I felt uneasy. Showing her the little holes in my earlobes shouldn't have been a big deal, but for some reason, it felt like one.

The hand that had brushed my hair was now caressing my ear. She touched the back of my earlobe, the spot where the earring's backing had been, and caressed it as if making sure nothing was there. I grabbed Sendai-san by the arm.

"Are you not going to put the earrings in?"

"I am, but I kind of wanted to see what the holes I made felt like now that you're not wearing any earrings."

Sendai-san said earnestly as she took her hand away from my ear.

"It's not like this is your first time seeing piercing holes before, right?"

Ibaraki-san and the others also had their ears pierced, so there was no way this was Sendai-san's first time seeing anyone else's piercing holes like this.

"Yeah, but this is my first time seeing yours, Miyagi."

"Stop looking at them so closely and put the earrings on for me already."

"Yeah, yeah."

Sendai-san picked up the new earrings and carefully placed them in

my ears. The gentle touch of her hand on my cheek and the ticklish sensation of her fingertips behind my ears made me flinch. After enduring it, I heard the soft clicks of both earrings securing into place, and Sendai-san pulled her hands back.

"Okay, they're in."

Sendai-san said as she handed me a mirror. I saw myself reflected with two small flower earrings in my ears. The silver flowers were far less noticeable than I had expected, which made me feel relieved. They were a little too cute for my taste, but tolerable.

"It really suits you."

Sendai-san said quietly as she caressed my earring.

I didn't respond to her comment. Instead, I decided to say something I'd been meaning to tell her.

"… Thank you for the earrings."

"You're welcome."

"How come you don't want to get your ears pierced, Sendai-san?"

I asked, brushing her arm away from my earring as I finally posed the question that had been on my mind. Back when we were in high school, we weren't allowed to get our ears pierced because it was against school rules, but now there was nothing stopping her.

"I don't really have a reason not to get them pierced, but, well, I guess I'd be okay with getting them pierced if it was to commemorate something."

Sendai-san said, staring at me intently, giving a different answer than she had in the past.

"Can I come a little closer?"

I remained silent, but Sendai-san scooted closer anyway.

"I just want to get a better look at the earrings."

Without waiting for my reply, her hand brushed against my ear,

fingertips tugging gently at the earlobes. The warmth of her touch spread across the area, sending a shiver down my spine and stiffening my neck and shoulders. I pulled back slightly, but Sendai-san closed the distance and pressed her lips to my ear.

"Miyagi."

She whispered my name softly. When I didn't reply, she repeated it, gently, right into my ear.

Then she kissed my ear again, instantly reminding me of what had happened that Sunday.

She grabbed my left hand and intertwined her fingers with mine.

Her teeth brushed against my earlobe as she bit down lightly. Her body pressed closer to mine than necessary, and she called my name again, her breath mingling with the sound.

"Sendai-san, wait."

I tried to push her away by her shoulders, but she didn't relent. Her fingers traced down my neck, and her lips followed. The warmth of her body spread slowly across my skin, and it felt so good that my breathing started to become irregular. She licked the spot where my neck met my shoulder, and this time, I pushed her away by the shoulders even harder than before.

"Did you not like that?"

Sendai-san asked softly.

"You're getting too carried away."

I untangled our fingers and pressed my palm to my neck.

"Miyagi."

"What?"

"Those earrings really suit you, so don't ever take them off."

She reached out again, clearly reluctant to let go, but I instinctively pulled back. This time, she didn't close the distance, and the tension

that had been building in my body finally began to relax.

"It’s not like I have other piercings I want to wear, so I was going to keep these ones in even without you telling me to."

I said, brushing my hand against my ear before taking a sip of my soda.

Volume 6 Interlude

Utsunomiya Maika's Confusion

(Maika PoV)

Part 153-extra

University campuses were full of all kinds of people—students, professors, and even people from other schools.

With so many faces around, it wasn't impossible to run into someone completely unexpected.

Still, the chances of that actually happening were next to none.

I'd never run into someone from my high school and ended up becoming friends with them before, so I believed those kinds of dramatic encounters hardly ever happened in real life.

Which was why I was so surprised when I saw Sendai-san at my university.

I stared down at my phone.

Saved inside was the contact information Sendai-san had shared with me just moments ago.

"Maika?"

Shiori, who was sitting right next to me, called out my name, and I looked up.

"What is it, Shiori? Is something wrong?"

"I feel like that should be my line. You've been staring at your phone this entire time. Did something happen?"

Something had happened, but I couldn't tell Shiori about it right now.

I wasn't going to tell her that I'd met Sendai-san earlier, or what we'd talked about. At least, not until Sendai-san came over to my place. For now, I needed to focus on the lecture that was about to start.

"Oh, I dropped my phone on the way here, so I'm just worried I might've damaged it."

Of course, I hadn't actually dropped it—far from it. I'd held it tightly the entire way to the lecture hall, careful not to let it slip from my hand. But I couldn't tell her that Sendai-san was on my mind, so I had no choice but to lie.

"Wait, what? Is your phone okay? Is it broken?"

"It seems fine for now. Anyway, Shiori, have you decided what you're going to do today?"

"I told you earlier already, but I'd like to stay for one more night."

"Okay, sounds good."

"Sorry."

Shiori said with an apologetic look on her face, so I smiled and replied,

"Don't worry about it."

"Thank you."

I watched Shiori, who looked relieved.

I didn't mind her staying over, and it never bothered me either.

But, well… I was still pretty shocked.

I tugged back the feelings that threatened to drag me down, tying them tight and forcing them still.

I swallowed the sigh that nearly escaped.

Shiori had told me she was living with a relative.

Her story had never quite added up, so finding out she was actually living with someone who wasn't a relative wasn't all that surprising, but still…

I never imagined that person would be Sendai-san.

Shiori and I were best friends, and we had always been together since high school. Well, maybe "always" wasn't exactly the right word to use, but we were around each other long enough that it felt that way.

And yet, she never told me the truth.

The fact that Shiori and Sendai-san even knew each other, let alone were friends, was a complete shock to me.

Last year, I'd had the chance to talk to Sendai-san directly, and I asked if she and Shiori were friends. She told me they weren't.

At the time, it was just something I'd blurted out—a question born from the small doubts that had piled up in my mind. I hadn't had any proof, so I accepted her answer without giving it much thought.

It wasn't that I'd believed her, but it wasn't that I hadn't either.

I'd just decided to let it be.

And now, after hearing today that they really had been friends all along, I couldn't process anything Sendai-san had just told me.

It felt like I'd just finished cleaning my room, only to kick over the trash can and scatter everything again—then be forced to start over from the beginning.

The doubts I'd once tidied away and convinced myself to forget were sprouting up again, making me want to view everything with suspicion.

"… Maika? Earth to Maika."

A gentle tap on my shoulder pulled me back to reality.

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't listening."

I said, looking at Shiori, the one who'd kept the truth from me.

"That's fine, but are you okay? You've been completely spaced out this whole time. Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine."

"… Um, was it something I did?"

Shiori asked hesitantly, glancing at me.

"Huh?"

"Well, you know… I kind of imposed on you out of nowhere and have been staying over at your place for a while now."

"Oh. No, no, it's not because of you, Shiori."

I smiled, but my mind slipped back to our high school days.

To that winter break when Shiori and I had studied together.

Back then, I'd asked her if she was friends with Sendai-san.

She'd given me the same answer as Sendai-san—that the two of them weren't close.

But in truth, they'd already been close back then. And now, the two of them were even living together.

"Are you sure?"

Shiori asked anxiously.

I wished I'd pressed her a little more back then and made her to tell me the truth.

But even if I had asked—

This isn't good.

It wasn't good for me to keep thinking about this in the state I was in now.

"Don’t worry. It gets a little boring being alone at home all the time, so I’m glad to have you over. It kinda feels like we’re roommates, doesn’t it?"

"Really?"

"Yep. Oh, what’s it like actually living with a roommate, though?"

I asked casually, pretending the thought had just come to me as I put my phone away and turned toward Shiori.

"Huh? Why are you asking about that all of a sudden?"

"Just curious. I want to know what it’s like living with your relative. It might be useful for the future, you know?"

"Are you thinking of getting a roommate, Maika?"

"Maybe. You never know."

"It’s normal. Nothing out of the ordinary."

Shiori replied in a flat tone.

She hadn’t talked much about her living situation the whole time she’d been staying over, so I hadn’t expected to get much out of her anyway. I wasn’t planning to press her about why she hadn’t told me the truth, or why she’d kept her friendship with Sendai-san a secret, either.

Those kinds of conversations could wait until things had settled—after she and Sendai-san, who she seemed to have argued with, have made up.

— At least, that’s what I told myself. Still, I hoped she would at least let me get away with asking about a few things.

"Since you’re living with your relative, that must mean you guys get along pretty well, right?"

The frustration of not being told anything as her best friend, mixed with some curiosity, made the words slip out before I could stop them.

Even if I managed to piece together a few scraps of information, it wouldn't be enough to form a full picture. Filling in the blanks myself would only lead me to the wrong conclusion anyway, so it was just a passing question I asked out of my own interest.

"Yeah, kind of."

"I didn't know you had relatives you were close enough to get into arguments with. You've never mentioned anything like that to me before, Shiori."

"I just never had the opportunity to bring it up."

"I see. So, does your relative look like you?"

"Why do you think they might look like me?"

"Well, because family members tend to look alike."

"I don't think we do, though."

She said in a clear voice.

"So, what kind of person are they?"

"Hmm, let me think. They're really nice, and they have long hair."

"What kind of description is that?"

"Well, that's just how they are."

"Hmm… I kinda want to meet them sometime."

"If the opportunity ever comes up."

Shiori said in a troubled tone, then quickly changed the subject.

"Oh, right. About today's homework…"

Resisting the urge to prod her further, I replied, "What about it?"

"There was something about it I wanted to ask you."

Shiori said, a little hesitantly.

I guess we're not talking about her relative anymore.

We'd spent a lot of time together and talked about so many things, but that didn't mean we knew everything about each other. Everyone had things they didn't want to say—things they'd rather keep to themselves—and I didn't think there was any need to force those into the open.

There were reasons for everything—reasons for keeping quiet, and reasons for not wanting to tell me.

And because Shiori was my best friend, I wanted to respect those reasons.

She wasn't the kind of person who'd tell lies for the sake of hurting someone.

That's why, I felt like I should just wait for her to tell me when she was ready.

"Oh, the professor's here."

Shiori said as I was in the middle of answering her questions.

I turned toward the front and replied, "Okay, let's pick this up later."

It had been almost two months since university started, and May was already coming to an end. I'd gotten used to this new environment full of unfamiliar things, but today's ninety-minute lecture felt longer than usual. It just wouldn't end.

I glanced at Shiori, who hardly ever talked about the person she was living with.

Unlike back in high school, she actually paid attention in class now.

There were other things about her that had changed too, like the earrings hidden beneath her hair. She hadn't worn any back then.

It wasn't strange that she had them now, considering I'd started wearing earrings myself, but when I'd once asked if she wanted to get matching ones, she hadn't given me a clear answer. So when she

suddenly decided to get her ears pierced, I couldn't help wondering if it had something to do with a boyfriend—or maybe with Sendai-san.

Come to think of it, did Sendai-san have any piercings?

I'd been so shocked to see her on campus that I couldn't remember at all.

It wouldn't be surprising if she did, but I couldn't even recall what kind of clothes she was wearing today.

I tore my gaze away from Shiori and looked back toward the front.

This really isn't good.

The more I tried not to think about it, the more my thoughts circled back to Shiori and Sendai-san.

I just couldn't figure it out. Those two had nothing in common, and I couldn't begin to understand why they were living together. I kept digging through the past, trying to make sense of the present.

But there was nothing that connected them.

Sendai-san had said they were living together because they were friends, but back in high school, she'd denied being friends with Shiori at all. She'd never explained why she'd lied then, or how they'd gotten close enough to move in together. Somehow, we'd only ended up talking about Shiori.

There were plenty of other things that bothered me, too.

If I really wanted answers, it would've been faster to just ask Shiori —who was sitting right next to me—than to chase down Sendai-san.

— Not that I planned on doing that, though.

I let out a quiet sigh and stopped myself from slumping over my desk.

I was still in the middle of class.

Straightening my back, I fixed my gaze on the professor.

No matter how much I thought about it, I was just running in circles. Before I could make myself dizzy, I forced my thoughts away from Shiori and Sendai-san and tried to focus on the lecture.

It didn't make the class go by any faster, but at least paying attention to the professor's voice kept me from thinking about things I shouldn't.

◇◇◇

After a long, long day at school, Shiori and I stopped by a family restaurant for dinner before heading home.

When I opened the front door, I called out, "I'm home," and Shiori followed right behind me, saying the same.

This felt pretty nice.

I'd never had a roommate before, so I didn't really know what it was like, but having someone else in the apartment made everything feel a little brighter. Of course, that was probably because the person that was with me was Shiori, and I felt like if it was her, I wouldn't mind sharing a place with her.

That was how much she meant to me as a dear friend.

Which was exactly why I wished she hadn't kept the fact that she was living with Sendai-san from me.

"Do you want something to drink, Shiori?"

I asked, looking over at her sitting on the rug.

"I'll have some orange juice."

She said.

"Okay, stay there. I'll get it for you."

I took the orange juice out of the fridge, poured it into a glass, and set it on the table.

"Thanks."

Shiori said, smiling at me.

I sat down across from her, and we started chatting about random things when my phone buzzed.

I looked at the screen and saw a message from Sendai-san that read,

『I'll be there soon. Is that okay?』

Earlier today, I'd told her she could come over once she was finished with work. I'd invited her over hoping that it would help the two of them make up, which was my main mission for today.

The two of them seemed to be avoiding each other.

Shiori had been staying at my place, refusing to go back to the apartment she shared with Sendai-san. And Sendai-san, claiming she was busy with tutoring, had told me to tell Shiori to come home instead of coming here herself.

There were a ton of things I wanted to ask both of them—and just as many things I wanted to say—but for now, getting them in the same room and sending them home together was my priority.

I texted back with, "Yep, it's fine. We'll be right here waiting for you."

Then, I lifted my gaze from my phone to Shiori.

"Are you sure you don't want to go home, Shiori?"

"Yeah."

"The person you're fighting with is probably really worried about you, though."

I said, picturing Sendai-san's face as I spoke.

Chapter 52

What I Don't Want Miyagi to Find Out (I)

(Sendai PoV)

Part 154

Even the days that felt special eventually got buried under the weight of time. I'd tucked the memory of that day away, somewhere it wouldn't stand out in my heart, and because of that, I was able to spend my days with Miyagi as if nothing had changed.

I couldn't say I was entirely satisfied with the way our days repeated, one indistinguishable from the next. But living like that was bringing our relationship closer to what it had once been.

Not every day was exactly the same, though.

"Sensei, are you having fun in university?"

Hanamaki-san, who had been doing her homework, looked up at me and asked.

"Well, kind of. What about you, Hanamaki-san? Are you having fun at school?"

I wasn't sure how well I was doing as a private tutor, but I'd gotten used to this job and being called "sensei." I'd also learned how to interact with Hanamaki-san, so I wasn't as nervous as I had been when I first started. While I tried to stay the same at home, I was changing as a private tutor.

"I am. It almost makes me want to stay in middle school forever."

Hanamaki-san sighed dramatically, saying something inappropriate for a student about to take entrance exams.

"I really wish I could stay in middle school forever. The people in my class are a lot of fun."

"Well, who knows? You might find high school pretty fun too."

"Did you have fun during high school, sensei?"

I hadn't gotten into the high school I was aiming for.

So I'd tried to make the most of my high school life—playing it smart, aiming for a decent experience—and for the most part, I had. But those days were very unremarkable.

That changed when I ended up spending nearly half of my high school days with Miyagi.

"I guess I had fun towards the end."

"Only towards the end? Are you saying it wasn't fun along the way?"

"Oh, it was, so I'm sure you'll have fun during high school too, Hanamaki-san."

I said with a smile.

"I know that, but you know, I still like the way things are right now."

Hanamaki-san sighed before continuing.

"So, what did you find fun in high school, sensei?"

Hanamaki-san wasn't the type to get overly excited or talk too much, but she liked to chat. Whenever she started asking questions, it felt like there was no end to the conversation. She was a stark contrast to Miyagi, who always preferred to stay quiet.

"Hmm, let me think…"

It was hard to answer her question, so I was at a loss for words. I couldn't mention what I did with Miyagi, and even if I did, it didn't sound like something most people would find fun.

"Oh, is it because you had a lover?"

Hanamaki-san's voice was filled with curiosity, and Miyagi's face immediately came to mind. But I quickly shooed the thought away

and forced a smile.

"Oh, I get it now. The reason why you find middle school so fun is because you have a lover, don't you, Hanamaki-san?"

"I don't have anyone like that."

Hanamaki-san replied immediately.

"I see. Well, if you do end up finding a partner, be sure to let me know, okay?"

Chatting was a good way to take a break and lighten the mood. A quick chat in the middle of studying helped her concentrate better in the long run. Normally, I'd indulge her with more conversation, but I didn't want to keep this topic going.

"Shall we get back to studying, then?"

I said, cutting the conversation short.

Hanamaki-san replied with, "Okay," and lowered her gaze to her notebook. Her pencil moved across the white paper.

As usual, I helped her with her studies until my shift was over and left Hanamaki-san's house. I walked to the train station, boarded the train home, and recalled the conversation I'd had with her earlier.

The word "lover" didn't apply to Miyagi when we were in high school, and it still didn't now. I had no idea if it would ever apply to us in the future.

I didn't want to use my feelings as an excuse for what we did that Sunday. But now, I had no idea when I would tell her how I felt. Whether I said it today or tomorrow, telling her I loved her would just make it seem like I was trying to gloss over the past.

I couldn't see a future where my feelings could be properly conveyed to her. The word "lover" seemed so far away. Right now, more than becoming lovers with Miyagi, what mattered was holding on to the relationship we had built so far.

Each passing minute made me feel more timid, and it made me realize just how much I'd lose by speaking up.

The train stopped at a station, then moved again. The same routine repeated as I got closer to my destination.

But where were Miyagi and I headed? I had no idea if we were even going in the same direction.

I got off the train, headed home under the streetlights, climbed the stairs, and opened the front door. Miyagi's shoes were by the entrance. I walked into the shared living space and saw a piece of paper on the table.

"There's pudding in the refrigerator.』

I looked in the fridge and saw two cups of pudding. Instead of grabbing one, I took out some vegetables and pork and stir-fried them. After a simple dinner, I walked over to Miyagi's bedroom.

I knocked on her door three times, and after a brief moment, Miyagi opened it, sticking her head out.

"Welcome home. Did you eat the pudding?"

"I'm back. I was just about to eat it, so I thought I'd come and get you."

Miyagi came out of her room and sat down in her chair. I brought the two cups of pudding from the fridge along with two spoons and took a seat.

"Let's eat."

We both said in unison.

I peeled the lid off, scooped up some pudding with my spoon, and tasted it. The firm pudding was sweeter than I'd expected. I looked at Miyagi, who was slowly digging into hers with a spoon. She seemed in a good mood, probably because of how good the pudding tasted.

Being together like this, I could tell Miyagi didn't hate me. But that didn't mean she liked me either. Miyagi always had a hard time believing what I said. Even if I told her how I felt, she might not believe me despite what we'd done that Sunday.

It seemed incredibly difficult just to get Miyagi to believe me, and I felt she'd instantly turn me down if I asked her to be in a relationship with me. Even now, if I pointed out that she seemed happy, she'd probably deny it.

Miyagi was like a wary stray cat who hated change. Adding "love" into the mix could destroy everything between us, and if I told her how I felt now, it could end our relationship completely.

We would probably no longer be roommates, and Miyagi would vanish from my life.

And if that were to happen… then it was best to just not say anything at all.

As long as we continued living like this, repeating one day after another, I could still touch Miyagi, even as just roommates. Our relationship wouldn't change, and I wouldn't lose anything either.

Even if I felt unsatisfied, I could recall our memories together, and that would be enough. The word "lover" wasn't something I should risk everything to attain.

I put another spoonful of pudding in my mouth and swallowed before speaking.

"Where'd you buy this pudding from?"

"Just from the nearby convenience store."

"I want some almond tofu next time."

"Then go get some yourself."

"You're so stingy, Miyagi."

If I were to confess my feelings to her, we wouldn't be able to talk like this anymore.

I was happy enough with just this.

We continued our meaningless conversation as we finished our pudding cups.

As the conversation began to lull, I stood up and walked over to Miyagi. I ran my fingers through her hair, my hand brushing against her ear. She shifted slightly, as if ticklish, and clutched at my clothes.

I traced her ear with my finger and eventually touched something firm. It was shaped like a small flower, and touching it made me feel like I was someone special to Miyagi. I didn't mind if I was the only one who felt that way.

I pressed my lips against her cheek, gave her a gentle peck, and pulled away.

As long as nothing changed between us, I could even kiss her.

I traced her lips with my thumb.

Miyagi pulled back a little, then looked up at me.

Our eyes met.

I curled my hand into a fist. My heart raced as if it might explode before I could even kiss her.

I closed my eyes and brought my lips to hers.

It only lasted a moment before I pulled away.

"Sendai-san, buy us something other than pudding tomorrow."

Miyagi said, letting go of the clothes she was holding.

"Okay."

I could endure this for a little longer.

What mattered most was that Miyagi was still here with me.

What I Don't Want Miyagi to Find Out (II)

Part 155

It was Saturday evening, and the weather was terrible.

I opened the curtains slightly and looked outside. The wind was so strong it seemed like a typhoon was approaching. The rain pounded against the windowpane. All I could see were rows of streetlights; it wouldn't have seemed strange to spot zombies wandering out there. If I went outside right now, it felt like there was a good chance I might run into something that wasn't human.

I closed the curtains as I kept thinking about things that would make Miyagi—who was easily scared—angry if she heard my thoughts.

"Hmm, maybe I should put a movie on."

The forecast had said it would rain tomorrow too, and there was nothing to do even if I got up early, so I turned on my tablet. I grabbed my headphones and played a horror movie. Tonight seemed like the perfect time for one.

I wished I could invite Miyagi to watch with me, but I knew if I made her watch a horror movie she'd end up hating me for the rest of her life. Besides, I doubted Miyagi would be willing to come to my room this late.

Around thirty minutes into the movie, I got thirsty. I went out to the shared living space and poured myself a glass of barley tea before returning to my room. When I got back, a heavy rumbling sounded outside my window. It was definitely thunder, and as I drank my barley tea I opened the curtains slightly and saw a flash of lightning in the distance.

"I wonder if Miyagi's good with thunder…"

Thinking back, I vaguely recalled her saying she hadn't been good with it back in high school.

I glanced at the clock.

It was a normal time to be asleep.

If the thunder hadn't woken her, I didn't want to risk being the one to wake her up instead. With that in mind, it was probably better not to go to her room to check on her.

But still, I was worried about Miyagi.

I paced around my room.

I had a dream earlier—one where the things I'd been trying not to think about were incredibly vivid—and because of it, I found it difficult to bring myself to walk to her door. I no longer had trouble looking her in the eye, but I still felt nervous.

I heard a low rumble in the distance. I hesitated for a few moments, wondering what to do.

In the end, I couldn't bring myself not to check on her, so I went to her bedroom door.

I took a couple of deep breaths, knocked once, and then a second time.

But Miyagi didn't open it.

I guess she's asleep after all.

It was probably better to go back to my room, but the thought that she might be awake made me freeze in my tracks. I was worried about her and wanted to see her face, and yet I felt it might be better not to. After hesitating a second time, I knocked harder than before—once, then again. I waited, but Miyagi still didn't come out.

Just as I was about to give up and return to my room, the door opened.

"… You're still awake, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi, wearing a sweatshirt, didn't look very sleepy, but she sounded annoyed.

"I was watching a movie. Are you okay with the thunder, Miyagi?"

"I'm fine."

"Didn't you say that you weren't good with it, though?"

"… I'm not good with it, but it's not like I'm scared or anything."

Her expression looked much the same as the first time she'd said that. She didn't even grow pale as more thunder rolled in the background.

"I see. That's good, then."

I felt relieved, but also a little disappointed.

I pushed those contradictory feelings down and said, "Good night," to Miyagi. As I turned, a loud thunderclap struck nearby and Miyagi instinctively grabbed my arm before immediately letting go.

I wanted her to hold on a little longer.

If the thunder got louder, maybe she'd cling and not let go.

With thoughts that made it hard to believe I'd only come to check on her out of concern, I called to Miyagi.

"Are you okay?"

If I asked whether she was scared, she would definitely deny it and probably storm back to her room and shut the door behind her.

"I was just startled by how loud it was."

"Wanna come to my room?"

Miyagi didn't reply.

She was probably wary of me.

"I was just thinking, if you can't fall asleep like this, why not watch a movie with me to pass the time?"

I said, as if to reassure her I had no other motives, and Miyagi

quietly replied with, “Okay,” before coming out of her room. I was the one who had invited her to over, but I was surprised she had accepted so readily. I walked back with Miyagi following behind me. We sat down, leaning our backs against my bed, and Miyagi reached for the tablet I had left on the table.

"What movie were you watching?"

Before I could answer, Miyagi pressed play. Unsettling music faintly leaked out from the headphones still plugged in, and she frantically moved to pause the video.

"You should’ve told me you were watching something weird."

Miyagi said as she kicked my ankle.

How unfair.

I wasn’t the one at fault here.

"You started it before I could say anything. Besides, I wasn’t watching anything weird. It’s just a horror movie."

"No, horror movies are weird. I can’t believe you’re watching one even with the weather like this."

"Well, I was watching it because of the weather. Don’t you think it suits the atmosphere?"

"No, it’s scary. I feel like something’s going to crawl in through the window."

Miyagi hugged her knees as she said what sounded like her true feelings. Sitting hunched like that, she looked like a stray cat frightened of humans. I wanted to reach out, to touch her and reassure her everything was okay, but if I tried, she would probably pull away before I even made contact—just like a real cat.

"I’m okay with watching whatever you want, so why don’t you pick something?"

I said. But instead of the tablet, she looked over at me.

"Are you going home for summer vacation, Sendai-san?"

"No. What about you?"

"I'm not going back either."

"I see."

The conversation trailed off.

Instead of choosing a movie, Miyagi pressed her hands—which had been wrapped around her knees—flat against the floor.

"… Why don't you want to go home, Sendai-san?"

"Hmm, I guess because I feel more comfortable here than at home. My parents aren't worried about me anyway. What about you? Aren't your parents worried about you?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Then how come you're not going home either?"

"There's no point. My family's rarely ever home even during summer vacation."

For once, Miyagi was talking about her home life.

Neither of us liked talking about our families. The subject wasn't something I wanted to touch on, and Miyagi had always avoided answering properly whenever I asked her. I had no idea why she suddenly brought it up now, but the fact she shared even a little about something she usually kept hidden made me feel closer to her than usual.

I looked down at her hands, pressed flat against the floor. I tried to reach out, but before I could touch them, Miyagi turned her body toward me.

"Sendai-san."

She said my name, and I paused.

I waited, but she didn't continue. She looked like she wanted to say something, but stayed silent.

"If there's something you want to say, then just say it."

"… Promise me you won't do anything weird."

Miyagi whispered quietly.

""Weird" as in like, putting on a horror movie?"

"No. You know exactly what I'm talking about, don't you?"

I did.

By "weird," she meant the things that kept showing up in my dreams, but I had no intention of acting on them without her permission. It wasn't that I didn't want to make those dreams real, but if I tried now, Miyagi would leave my room immediately, and I couldn't let that happen.

"I promise I won't. Do you want me to swear on your earrings?"

Miyagi gave a small nod. I tucked her hair behind her ear and leaned closer.

"I won't do anything weird for now."

I whispered in her ear before kissing her flower earring. Then my lips wandered lower, down to her neck, where I sank my teeth in softly. The sweet scent of her shampoo was pleasant. As I bit gently, Miyagi pushed me away.

"Didn't you just say you wouldn't do anything weird? And what do you mean "for now"?"

"That's all I'm promising you. You never specified how long I had to keep it for."

"Sendai-san… Why do you always say such stupid things?"

"Hmm, maybe because I am stupid?"

"… Whatever."

Miyagi sounded exasperated as she leaned her back against the bed

again.

"Can I hold your hand?"

She didn't reply. Instead, Miyagi silently picked up the tablet from the table and leaned against my shoulder.

Feeling comforted that we were at least close enough to share body heat, I looked down at the screen. The horror movie I had been watching earlier had been replaced with a Japanese film released a few years ago.

"It's a little quieter outside now, huh?"

I said without looking at her. There was still some rumbling in the distance, but the storm didn't sound close enough to crash through the walls anymore.

"Is it still raining?"

"Doesn't sound like it. What do you want to do now?"

I didn't want to suggest she go back to her room. If anything, I wanted to keep her locked in mine.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing. Forget I said anything."

"Can I start the movie?"

Miyagi asked, pointing at the tablet screen.

"Sure."

With that, she removed the headphones I had left plugged in earlier and pressed play.

What I Don't Want Miyagi to Find Out (III)

Part 156

Miyagi leaned her shoulder against mine, but she didn't take my hand. So I reached over and laced our fingers together myself.

She didn't complain, and we stayed like that, holding hands while the movie played.

Part of me wanted more—another excuse to touch her somewhere else—but if I pushed my luck she'd probably pull away, and I didn't want her to let go of my hand. So I kept my eyes fixed on the screen like her.

The movie was one of those predictable romance flicks. Not boring, but not exactly gripping either. Still, Miyagi watched without a word, so I did too, letting my gaze follow the characters on the tablet. At some point the thunder outside had faded, leaving only the quiet ticking of time.

"Do you want to watch something else after this?"

I asked as the movie neared its end.

There was no reply. I turned and found Miyagi's eyes closed—too long for a blink. It was no wonder. Two hours of sitting through a movie would make anyone sleepy.

Maybe I should let her go to sleep.

But the only place she could sleep in my room was my bed, and Miyagi would never lie down there without protest. If I told her to go to sleep, she'd probably head back to her own room.

If it were up to me, I wouldn't say anything. I wanted her to stay in my room a bit longer.

Still, I couldn't ignore how sleepy she looked.

"Miyagi, if you're tired, you can sleep."

I reached out with my free hand and tapped the tablet's screen, freezing the main character in some awkward pose. Beside me, her drowsy voice slipped out.

"I'm fine."

"You're basically half-asleep right now."

"No, I'm not. I'm awake."

"Do you think you'll make it until the end of the movie?"

"… I'll go back to my room, then."

Getting the answer I'd expected, I tightened my grip on Miyagi's hand before she could get up.

"I haven't forgotten the promise I made you, so you can have my bed."

"It's fine. I'll just sleep in my own room."

Miyagi, who looked so sleepy, said firmly.

I understood her reluctance to fall asleep in my room, but I didn't want her to leave either. Not knowing how to convince her to stay, I tightened my grip on her hand once more.

"… Sendai-san, when you said you'd keep your promise "for now," how long is that?"

I'd sworn on her earrings that I wouldn't do anything weird "for now," but Miyagi wanted to know exactly how long that meant. If I answered incorrectly, she'd leave the room, so I chose my words carefully.

"Until you leave my room."

She pulled her hand away.

But she didn't stand up.

"I’m going to watch some more movies."

I said, and Miyagi spoke quietly beside me.

"For how long?"

"All the way until morning."

"… I’ll sleep in your bed, then."

Miyagi mumbled and went to lay down on the bed we’d been leaning against.

I turned off the lights and turned on a night light.

I plugged my headphones back into the tablet and pressed play. The main character, frozen before, began to move again and the story continued toward its end. But I couldn’t follow along very well—I was incredibly conscious of Miyagi right behind me. The movie played on, but most of my attention was on my back. I couldn’t even bring myself to move.

I shouldn’t think too much about it.

I told myself that, but it was easier said than done.

Suddenly I flinched.

Just as I was about to take a deep breath, something brushed against my back. I took my headphones off and turned around; it was my own pillow that had been brushing me. Miyagi, whom I’d expected to be asleep, was sitting up on my bed.

"Sendai-san."

"What is it?"

"You swear you’ll keep your promise?"

Miyagi asked, as if double-checking.

"Yeah, I swear I will."

I answered firmly, hoping it would help her fall asleep. She replied quietly with,

"… I'll let you use half the bed."

"You'll "let" me use it? But in your own words, my room is my territory, you know?"

"But your bed is my territory."

"How does that work?"

I couldn't help but argue, and Miyagi hit me with my own pillow.

"You're the one who said I could have your bed, weren't you, Sendai-san? So the bed is my territory, and I'm letting you use half of it."

Somehow, Miyagi had claimed ownership of the bed I'd offered her, but that didn't matter as much as the fact that she was letting me sleep next to her.

"Are you really letting me use half the bed?"

"If you don't want to, you can keep watching your movies."

Miyagi replied coldly as she turned her back to me and lay down.

"No, I'll go to sleep too."

I turned off the tablet.

Miyagi took the half of the bed closest to the wall, and I crawled into the remaining space.

"It feels a little cramped."

I heard her dissatisfied voice next to me. It was so like her to complain despite offering the bed, but more than anything, I couldn't believe she'd suggested this at all.

"Well, it is a single bed. Should I buy us a double bed?"

"You don't have to. I'm not sleeping here again after this."

Her voice sounded a bit clearer, as if she were now wide awake.

"Oh, really? What if I told you scary stories every night from now on?"

"If you do that, I'll never speak to you again, Sendai-san."

"I was just kidding."

I quickly took back what I'd said, but Miyagi curled up and pulled the comforter with her, leaving me uncovered. It wasn't very cold tonight. In fact, it was pretty warm, so I didn't mind being without it. But I didn't like that Miyagi's back was buried under the covers, hidden from view.

I'd much rather be staring at Miyagi's back than at the comforter, and more than that, I wanted to touch her. If I could have it my way, I'd pull the covers off completely, lift her sweatshirt, and touch her bare skin.

But I couldn't break my promise. If I broke the vow I'd sworn on her earrings, Miyagi would actually get angry with me.

Still, I couldn't resist the urge to touch her somewhere, so I lifted the comforter slightly and tugged on her sweatshirt.

"Are you not sleeping yet, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi asked quietly.

"No, not yet. Can you turn this way, Miyagi?"

"Why?"

"Because I want to kiss you."

I decided to say something I knew Miyagi would never allow.

"Not now."

The words I'd expected came immediately, but her rejection was softer than I'd imagined. I brushed my hand gently across her back over the fabric of her sweatshirt.

"You’re so stingy, Miyagi."

"It doesn’t matter if I’m stingy, does it?"

She showed no sign of turning toward me. I tapped her curled-up back with my fingers, and in return, she called my name in a serious tone.

"Sendai-san."

"What is it?"

"… These earrings…"

Her words trailed off.

"What about them?"

"Is there some kind of special meaning behind them?"

She asked, her voice so quiet I might have missed it if I weren’t listening closely.

"A special meaning?"

"You gave me earrings with a plumeria design, right?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"I looked up what plumerias meant in the language of flowers."

"What’d you find out?"

"… They represent elegant and bashful maiden."

"Seems like it suits you perfectly."

"You say that, but I know you don’t mean it."

Miyagi sounded displeased. I pulled my hand away from her back and sighed.

I had already guessed Miyagi might look up the meaning of

plumerias, so I'd chosen them precisely because the flower didn't really mean anything in the language of flowers.

"Those earrings are just so I won't forget the promises I make you. There's really no deeper meaning behind them. Or did you want there to be one?"

"… No."

Miyagi mumbled, then fell quiet. I was relieved she didn't press further.

But she was right.

There was a deeper meaning.

To be precise, it had nothing to do with the language of flowers, but with what plumerias symbolized in general.

It meant "to wish happiness upon a loved one."

That was the true meaning behind Miyagi's earrings.

I'd always liked small-flower designs, and while researching, I'd come across the meaning of Hawaiian jewelry with a plumeria motif. That was why I chose them for her.

But I didn't want Miyagi to know there was any meaning behind it.

"Just think of them as a good luck charm or something."

I shrugged it off and tugged the comforter back over myself.

The meaning behind those earrings was something only I needed to know.

If Miyagi found out, she might never want to wear them again. And even if she did discover it someday, I could always feign ignorance.

"Aren't you sleepy, Miyagi? You should go to sleep."

"You should sleep too, Sendai-san."

"I was going to do that even if you didn't tell me to."

I'd thought about it after learning the meaning behind those earrings.

I could forgive Miyagi if she didn't like me back, but I couldn't forgive her if she liked anyone else.

It didn't seem like there was anyone she liked right now. But if she ever did, that someone should be me.

And if, one day, Miyagi fell in love with someone else?

My heart wasn't big enough to wish her happiness. In that case, I wanted the earrings to wish it for me. At the same time, I hoped that, like the plumeria's meaning in the language of flowers, Miyagi would be too shy to confess her feelings to anyone else.

I tugged gently on her sweatshirt.

"Good night."

I whispered, and she quietly replied, "Good night," in return.

Chapter 53

Learning to Trust Sendai-san, Bit by Bit (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 157

When I woke up, I noticed the black cat plush wasn't around.

I reached around, searching for the stuffed animal that should've been next to me.

My body, still half-asleep, felt stiff, as if I'd been stuck to the bed with duct tape. As I fought against my heavy eyelids, my hand came into contact with something firmer and smoother. It clearly wasn't a stuffed animal, but something much larger instead.

Not knowing what it was, I grabbed on tightly.

I could clearly feel warmth under the palm of my hand.

I thought I even heard a groan along with it.

— There was something strange on my bed that wasn't a stuffed animal.

My eyes, which had been closed until now, suddenly bolted open.

"… Huh?"

In front of my eyes was not the black cat, but Sendai-san, who wasn't supposed to be here.

And what's more, she was really close.

Our bodies weren't touching, but if I reached out even slightly, I'd be able to touch her cheek. And it seemed like what I'd touched was, in fact, her head.

I ran my fingers through her hair.

Her long hair fell softly, as if escaping between my fingers.

Her eyes remained closed.

Now that I thought about it, I'd fallen asleep in Sendai-san's room last night.

The weather was all windy and terrible.

I hated nights like that. Scary things always happened in TV shows and manga whenever the weather was awful or the wind too strong, so whenever I stayed up too long, I'd always end up too scared to fall asleep, fearing that something might happen.

But unlike before, it didn't scare me as much anymore.

And the reason for that was lying right in front of me.

"… Sendai-san."

I called her name gently as I touched her cheek and pinched it lightly.

Sendai-san shuffled around, but still didn't wake up.

I had always used to be alone all night, so just knowing that someone else was in the apartment with me nowadays made me feel a lot safer. I wasn't good with thunder either, but I could deal with the rumbling without needing to crawl under my covers.

I had planned to deal with it alone last night.

But instead, Sendai-san had come over to my room.

I felt more at ease actually having her by my side than just being able to sense her presence on the other side of the wall.

I slid my hand from her cheek down to her lips, tracing them with my fingertip.

These lips had touched me so many times, even while we were on this bed.

Memories suddenly started rushing back into my mind, making me want to leap straight out of bed, but I kept myself in place.

A considerable amount of time had passed since that day already, so I wanted to be able to recall those memories without getting flustered. But the more I thought about it, the more separated it became from every other day, and it would turn that Sunday into something more special than it should be.

It was best to act as normal as possible.

I closed my eyes and let the memories that had surfaced sink in.

Yesterday, I'd mustered up the courage to do something I normally wouldn't have done and chose not to leave Sendai-san's room. I didn't want to hog her bed all to myself while she stayed up all night, so that was how we ended up in the situation we were in now.

Everything's fine.

I kept my eyes open and stared at Sendai-san.

She seemed to be sleeping soundly, without a care in the world.

Sendai-san, who was curled up at the edge of the bed, looked more cute than pretty like this.

I pinched her cheek once again, but was met with no reaction.

I was having trouble falling back asleep, so I was a little jealous of how soundly Sendai-san was sleeping. It was her bed, so it made sense she'd sleep well in it, but the more I thought about it, the more unfair it felt that she could just rest there with such a calm, untroubled expression. After all, the reason my life had been filled with so many more moments that demanded I summon my courage was because of her.

— It was kind of irritating.

So I slipped my finger just slightly into her mouth.

Her hand twitched in protest when my fingertip brushed against her

teeth. A drowsy, “… What?” came from her, and I used her parted lips as an opportunity to slowly push my finger deeper.

My fingertip grazed her warm tongue, and when I pressed lightly, she bit down. Tracing my finger along the edge of her teeth made her bite harder, until I finally pulled it free.

"Don’t wake me up so weirdly."

Sendai-san said, furrowing her brow—a rare sight.

"I didn’t do anything to wake you up. You just woke up on your own."

"I think anyone would get woken up if they had a finger shoved in their mouth. If you’re going to wake me up, just do it normally next time."

Her voice sounded more dazed than usual, and she followed it up with a yawn.

When I tugged lightly at her bangs, she ruffled her hair with a tired sigh and shut her eyes again.

"Are you going back to sleep?"

"Yeah, I’m still sleepy."

"But if you’re already awake, you should get up."

"Not happening."

Sendai-san answered curtly, keeping her eyes closed.

I reached out and touched her ear.

"You should sleep some more too, Miyagi."

She mumbled as she brushed my hand away.

Instead of replying, I touched her ear once again, tracing the outline of it as if to get a feel for its shape.

My finger slid down to her earlobe, which, unlike mine, was bare. It

felt cooler than her cheek, and also very soft and pleasant. My gentle touch didn't seem to be enough to get Sendai-san to open her eyes. But when I slipped my finger into her ear, she grabbed onto my arm.

"Hey, that tickles."

Sendai-san had never stopped even when I said the same thing to her last time I was on her bed.

I tugged on her ear, hard.

I wondered how she'd react if I kissed her ear right now, but I quickly shoved the intrusive thought out of my mind and let go of her ear. Then, I lifted my body up slightly and placed my lips on Sendai-san's neck instead.

She flinched.

I couldn't tell if her eyes had opened, but the sweet scent of her shampoo filled my nose.

She always smelled good.

I licked her skin as if tasting it, then bit down hard, until my teeth sank into the firm muscle beneath the softness. She smacked my shoulder. I eased up, but continued to lick her with my tongue. This time, she shoved me back with more force.

Reluctantly, I pulled away—only to find her half off the bed. Panicking, I caught her sweatshirt and pulled her toward me with all my strength.

She flopped back onto the mattress, facedown with a soft thud.

"Why are you trying to wake me up in all these creative ways?"

Sendai-san asked, stroking the spot I'd just bitten.

"I'm just bored."

"So you decided to bite me just because you were bored? Isn't that a little weird?"

"Are you not going to get up?"

"Nope."

"Fine, then I'm going back to my room."

Suddenly, the hand she'd been using to stroke her neck stopped. Sendai-san, still lying face down, turned to face me.

"Why don't you just sleep a bit longer with me? You don't have any plans for today, right?"

This time, it was my sweatshirt being tugged.

"I don't, but…"

Even without parting the curtains, I could tell the weather was still terrible outside. So even if I did have plans, I wouldn't want to go anywhere anyway. But still, I wasn't sure if I should stay in bed like this with Sendai-san.

"Don't worry. I'll keep the promise I made you yesterday."

She wouldn't do anything strange to me until I left her room.

That was the promise she'd made yesterday.

And I still hadn't left the room yet.

Sendai-san, who was known for breaking promises, always seemed to keep the ones she swore on my earrings.

That fact alone reassured me.

It made me feel like I could actually trust Sendai-san more than I used to.

These earrings were special.

Maybe they were kind of like a charm, just like she said, after all.

I reached up and touched my earrings before giving her my answer.

"Fine. Just for another thirty minutes."

"How about an hour?"

Sendai-san said as she inched closer, and I pushed her away with just enough force that she wouldn’t fall off the bed.

"No, thirty minutes."

"Okay, thirty minutes it is, then."

Sendai-san said quietly as she closed her eyes again.

Learning to Trust Sendai-san, Bit by Bit (II)

Part 158

I tried closing my eyes, hoping I could fall back asleep, but it was no use.

Sendai-san had drifted off again almost immediately.

I sighed, staring up at the ceiling.

My sleepiness had completely vanished. I was already wide awake, and with Sendai-san lying so close, I didn't feel like sleeping anymore anyway.

Annoyed by how soundly she was sleeping, I kicked her leg.

"Wake up."

"Has it been thirty minutes already?"

She asked in a drowsy voice, her eyes still closed.

"I don't know."

I hadn't checked the time before closing my eyes, so I wasn't sure if thirty minutes had passed. All I knew was that it was almost 11 AM.

"… If you're not sure, then I'm going back to sleep."

"Why are you so sleepy anyway?"

"Because I had a hard time falling asleep last night."

Sendai-san murmured as she slowly opened her eyes to look at me.

"But you looked like you were sleeping so soundly."

"Well, I went to bed pretty late. By the time you woke up, I was

probably out cold."

"Why couldn't you sleep?"

"Hmm, not sure. Maybe because the bed felt cramped?"

Her tone made it sound like she'd just come up with an excuse on the spot.

"Well, I'm hungry, so I'm getting up. You can sleep more if you want, Sendai-san."

I wasn't actually hungry enough to eat, but since she'd said she couldn't sleep because the bed was cramped, I felt a little guilty. So, I decided to get up.

"Are you planning to eat right now, Miyagi?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, then I'll get up and eat too."

Yawning, Sendai-san sat up. She got out of bed before I did, stretched, and glanced over at the clock.

"It's kind of a weird time to eat, but oh well. Should we call this breakfast or lunch?"

It was too late for breakfast, but still a little early for lunch. It was an awkward time to eat. Still, if I had to choose, I preferred the option that would save us from having to prepare one more meal.

"Lunch."

I answered curtly before getting up from the bed as well.

"I'll cook us something, so feel free to just wait."

"Let me help."

"Okay, but let's change first before cooking."

I nodded at her suggestion and headed to the bathroom. After brushing my teeth and washing my face, I changed and went to the

shared living space. There, I found Sendai-san, already changed into a long skirt, starting on lunch.

Her outfit was a stark contrast to my plain T-shirt and pants. It looked really good on her.

"What are you making?"

"Sausages and omelets. I'll leave the bread to you, Miyagi."

I did as she said, putting slices of bread in the toaster. While I set out plates and grabbed some jam and butter, she cooked the eggs and sausages. Finally, we each poured a glass of orange juice and brought everything to the table.

"Let's eat."

We said in unison.

As I spread butter and jam on my toast, Sendai-san, chewing on a sausage, stared at me.

"Do you have any plans after this?"

"No."

"Then do you want to finish the movie we were watching yesterday?"

"It wasn't that interesting, so I don't mind if we don't."

I didn't have any plans today, and I was fine spending Sunday with her. But I wasn't interested in finishing that movie. I bit into my toast and sipped my juice, not having any better suggestions for how to pass the time.

"You don't have anything else planned anyway, right? So we might as well finish it. It might've been boring, but at least it'll kill some time."

"I guess you're right."

"Then it's settled. We'll finish it after eating."

Sendai-san filled my schedule for me as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I could complain about how pushy she was, but honestly, this level of pushiness was necessary if we wanted our Sundays to feel like they used to.

As long as tension lingered between us, living together would be hard. It was easier like this—spending time naturally. If she'd been too considerate, it would've only worn me out.

"You fell asleep partway through the movie, right, Miyagi? How much did you actually watch?"

"I didn't fall asleep. I was just dozing off."

"Well, anyway. Do you remember at least some of it?"

"I think so… vaguely."

We finished the rest of our food while talking about the movie I hadn't really cared for. After cleaning up the dishes, we went back to her room.

"Is it okay if I start from here?"

She held the tablet and looked at me from right beside me. I replied with a simple, "Yes," and she started playing it from where we'd left off. The movie ran all the way through to the credits.

"What did you think?"

She asked. I decided to answer her honestly.

"… I didn't really like it."

"But weren't you the one who picked it?"

"Yeah, but it ended up being kind of boring."

I leaned back against her bed while she scrolled for something else.

"Want to watch something else?"

"Not really."

"Then what do you want to do?"

"We don’t have to do anything, do we?"

"Isn’t that boring?"

She put the tablet down and leaned against the bed too.

"Well, if you want to go out, I don’t mind even if it’s raining."

"I definitely don’t want to go outside."

"Hmm, then you think of something for us to do, Miyagi."

"How about a video game?"

"I don’t really like video games."

Her displeasure was obvious. Back in high school, when we’d tried playing one, she’d been terrible at it. She wasn’t the gamer type, and I doubted she’d enjoy it now, even just to pass the time.

"Well, then I guess there’s nothing for us to do."

"I wouldn’t say there’s nothing…"

She said, as if suggesting something.

"… What do you have in mind?"

"Face this way."

She didn’t answer my question directly, but I turned toward her anyway. She grabbed my hand, sending a sharp jolt through me to my fingertips. As I looked down at our joined hands, I heard her call my name.

"Miyagi."

The moment I lifted my head, her lips touched mine.

But she pulled away almost instantly.

I didn’t exactly like the idea of kissing her in her room, but I could

let her get away with this much. We'd kissed plenty of times before, and if I said I disliked it, it'd only make me seem like I was too conscious of something else. Letting her go this far was fine.

Sendai-san immediately leaned in again, this time bringing her tongue to my lips.

I instinctively tried to back away, but she slipped inside my mouth. I tried pushing her off, but my space was stolen far too easily.

We hadn't kissed like this since that day.

Even though I didn't want to recall it, memories of that Sunday rose vividly in my mind. I hurried to push them away—only for something warm and soft to press in deeper, entwining with my tongue. The heat that had been mine alone was taken, replaced by hers. As our warmth blended together, my head began to go blank.

I grabbed at her clothes, pulling her toward me, and bit her tongue —not hard enough to leave a mark, but with force.

She pulled back slightly, only to lean in again. Then, almost as if in retaliation, she bit my lip.

This pushy side of Sendai-san was the most like her, but right now wasn't the time or place for that kind of pushiness.

"If this is what you had in mind, I'd rather not."

I let go of her clothes and pushed her away.

"You don't like kissing?"

She asked unexpectedly.

"It's not that I don't like it, but I don't think it's something we should be doing right now."

"So you do like it, then?"

"What's up with you, Sendai-san? Didn't you say you wouldn't do anything weird to me?"

"I told you the promise only lasted until you left my room. But since

we already left earlier to eat, that promise has expired."

I remembered the promise she'd made me.

Even if it had technically expired, I wanted to bring it up again—just in case she might change her mind and decide to keep it anyway. And if she didn't, then I'd just make her promise again.

"Fine, then promise me again."

All I needed was for Sendai-san to swear once more on my earrings.

"Okay."

With that, she leaned closer, just like when she'd kissed me earlier, and whispered in my ear.

"I won't do anything weird to you—but only after this."

"After what?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she kissed my earring, then pressed her lips against my neck.

The spot she touched burned with heat.

She leaned into me, putting her weight on me. Before I could push her away, I was pressed flat against the floor. The hem of my T-shirt lifted slightly as her hand slipped beneath it.

"Sendai-san!"

I called her name loudly.

She had definitely heard me, but her hand kept moving upward, sliding along my side until it reached my ribs. I caught her hand through the fabric of my shirt and held it down.

"What do you think you're doing with your hand?"

"Do you hate it when I touch you?"

She asked another unexpected question.

"What if I said yes?"

"Then I won't ever touch you again."

She's doing it again.

At times like this, Sendai-san always forced me to choose. She kept asking me these questions when the answer had already been decided for me from the start.

"… I don't want you touching me right now, so get off me and keep the promise you made me."

I tried to push her away, but she didn't move.

I dug my nails into her shoulders, gripping hard enough to leave marks.

"Play rock, paper, scissors with me, Miyagi."

"Huh?"

Her completely random words, coming from someone pinning me down, made me loosen my grip.

"Rock, paper…"

"Wait—"

"Scissors."

Before I could fully process what she was saying, she had already thrown paper. I reacted instinctively and threw scissors.

"Well, since you won, I guess I'll get off you."

She finally moved away. I tugged my T-shirt back down and stood up.

"And I'll keep my promise, too,"

Sendai-san added with a smile.

"… What would you have done if I'd lost?"

"Hmm, I wonder?"

I couldn’t tell what she would have done. But somehow, I felt that even if I had lost, she still would’ve kept her promise.

Learning to Trust Sendai-san, Bit by Bit (III)

Part 159

"This feels like a fitting punishment for all the weird things you've done."

I said as I placed a cold towel over Sendai-san's forehead. She looked unusually listless today.

"You're so mean, Miyagi."

"Did you already take your medicine?"

"Yeah."

Her raspy voice came from the bed where she lay.

A few days had passed since that rainy night we spent together, and now her temperature was over 38°C.

She had looked unwell since this morning. She wasn't coughing, but she'd said her throat hurt, and her complexion was pale. Despite that, she insisted she was fine and went to class anyway. When I came home from university, I found her slumped over in her room. Now she was lying in bed, clearly exhausted. She didn't quite look like a zombie, but she was far from healthy.

I wasn't a doctor, so I couldn't say what she had for certain, but it was probably just a cold.

"Was it really so hot yesterday that you had to turn on the air conditioner?"

I asked, watching her lie still with her eyes closed.

"Yeah, I felt like I needed it."

"Well, you should've at least turned it off before going to bed."

"I'll reflect on my actions."

Her weak voice carried no weight. She had gone to bed last night without turning the air conditioner off. I knew she was sensitive to the heat, but it hadn't been that hot. Even with July approaching, the nights weren't unbearable.

"I feel like I should say this in advance, but I can't make porridge or anything like that for you."

She probably already knew I wasn't much help in situations like this, but I felt the need to say it anyway. Ever since moving in together, I'd helped with cooking, but I was nowhere near the level of making food for a sick person. If she'd told me earlier that she felt this bad, I could've at least picked something up on the way home.

"You don't have to make me anything. It'd be a problem if you burned yourself. And even more so if you burned the pot, too… so yeah, don't even try it."

"Hearing you say that is kind of irritating."

She wasn't wrong. I probably would end up burning myself and the pot. Still, hearing it from her annoyed me.

"I don't have an appetite anyway, so you really don't need to do anything for me."

"I can at least buy you something to eat, like yogurt or instant porridge, maybe?"

I couldn't cook, but I could at least buy her something. I also wanted to get cooling patches to replace the towel I'd put on her forehead. There wasn't much I could do for her, but I couldn't just leave her alone while she was sick. Plus, not eating would only be worse for her health.

"I don't need anything."

"Tell me what you want, and I'll buy it for you."

"Seriously, I don't need anything. Just stay with me for a little while."

She mumbled, slowly opening her eyes. Then, as if realizing what she had just said, she quickly followed up with,

"Wait, pretend you didn't hear that."

"Why?"

"I don't want you to catch my cold, so you should go back to your room."

Her voice sounded much clearer than before.

Sendai-san had a point. The longer I was in the same room as her, the higher my chances of catching her cold were. But I'd ventilated her room by opening a window as soon as I came in, and I had nothing else to do even if I left right now. I didn't really care about what to eat for dinner, since I was probably just going to eat frozen food or instant noodles anyway, and I'd be able to prepare it quickly and finish eating just as fast. I also didn't really have much homework to do today either.

"I've got plenty of free time today, so I'll stay here a bit longer. I can go shopping later."

Rather than sitting in my own room worrying about her, it was better to stay by her side.

"You should leave. I really don't want you catching this."

"I don't usually get sick easily, so I'll stay until you fall asleep."

"… Wait, are you actually worried about me?"

"Even I'd get a little worried seeing you like this."

"Somehow, it's kind of gross seeing you be so nice, Miyagi."

She stared at me as she said something rude.

"Come on. Hurry up and get some sleep already."

I patted the edge of her comforter, and she closed her eyes.

"You can go back to your room once I'm asleep."

"Okay."

The room fell silent after that. I flipped the towel on her forehead to the cooler side.

I'd visited her house once back in high school when she was sick, but she had been in better spirits then than she was now. Today, Sendai-san looked so unwell that I could tell she had a fever just by looking at her. Her breathing was uneven, though not as heavy as when she exercised.

She looked so weak that she probably wouldn't be able to resist anything no matter what I did.

In this state, she couldn't do anything strange to me, and I didn't need her to swear on my earrings to promise that she wouldn't.

I sat with my back against the bed. I had said I'd stay since I had nothing better to do, but even so, there wasn't much to do while she drifted in and out of sleep.

A fashion magazine lay forgotten on the floor, so I picked it up and flipped through the flashy pages without really looking at them. One after another, the thin sheets slipped through my fingers.

Mixed in with her steady breathing came a faint, strained sound that made me glance up. The towel had slipped from her forehead.

I really should go out and buy her some cooling patches.

"… Are you okay?"

I asked softly, not intending to wake her, as I placed the towel back on her. I didn't expect a response, but she mumbled something faint that I couldn't make out.

Maybe she was a light sleeper.

I wondered—if I were to call her name, would she end up dreaming about me?

"Sendai-san."

I whispered close to her ear.

She groaned, though I couldn't tell what she was trying to say.

"Sendai-san."

"… Mm…"

She still responded every time I called her name. It wasn't exactly fair to bother someone who was sick, but the way she answered so dutifully only made me want to do it again. I knew I should feel bad, yet seeing Sendai-san so quiet and uncharacteristically subdued was kind of adorable.

And…

It was completely inappropriate, but the sounds slipping out of her mouth were almost indistinguishable from pleasure. Her breathing was ragged, too, which only made me think of it more.

Maybe I was only thinking this way because of where we were.

This was the kind of place where thoughts like that weren't so strange, and I had wondered before what kind of sounds she might make. So, these indecent thoughts came to me quite easily. Even so, imagining things like that while she was sick felt wrong — and I hated myself a little for it.

I wasn't supposed to think this way. But ever since that Sunday, it was like someone had rewired something inside me and flipped a switch I didn't even know existed. Sendai-san had always had a way of hijacking my thoughts, but now they spiraled toward her even more easily, whether I wanted them to or not.

Still, that wasn't something I should wake a sick person up just to complain about.

"I'm going to go back to my room now."

I said, knowing she probably wouldn't hear me anyway, and stood up.

I was afraid that if I stayed any longer, I'd just end up having more

inappropriate thoughts.

I needed to go outside and clear my head.

"… Where are you going?"

Just as my hand touched the doorknob, a voice came from behind me.

I turned around and saw Sendai-san staring at me.

"I was just going to go buy a few things. I'll be back soon."

She didn't reply, even though she'd been mumbling responses to everything I'd said earlier.

"Hey, say something."

"See you later."

Sendai-san spoke quietly before closing her eyes again.

I walked over to her bed and sat down beside her.

"You're going to catch my cold if you stay here. You should go already."

"I said I'd only go back to my room once you fell asleep, didn't I?"

"Well, I was asleep a few minutes ago."

"But you're awake now, aren't you?"

"Fine, but don't blame me if you end up getting sick too."

She gave up arguing and shut her eyes again. I tugged gently at her bangs, damp with sweat, and she slapped my hand away in annoyance.

"I'm not worried. You'll take care of me if I get sick, won't you?"

I said, moving down to sit on the floor.

"Yeah," she murmured, starting to stroke my hair.

I could have easily brushed her hand away, but she had a fever. I couldn't bring myself to be mean to a sick person, so I let her do whatever she wanted.

I'll stay until she gets tired of stroking my hair, I thought to myself.

Chapter 54

How Miyagi Sees Me (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 160

Sometimes, on my way home from campus, I would run into a cat.

Of course, I was talking about an actual cat, not Miyagi.

Though, if I were to run into a cat, I'd much rather it be Miyagi — but a real one wasn't so bad either. I'd never had any particular fondness for cats before, but ever since I'd started living with someone who resembled a stray cat, I'd begun noticing them more often.

Sometimes, it was there. Sometimes, it wasn't.

I scanned the area as I walked, and before long, I spotted a calico cat grooming itself on the side of the road. Today seemed to be one of those days when the cat was willing to show itself.

"Hey, little kitty."

I crouched down near it.

"Will you let me pet you today?"

I reached my hand out toward the cat. If this had been Miyagi, she definitely would have said no — but the calico simply meowed and allowed me to stroke its back. It never appeared on my way to campus, and it looked like a stray, but every now and then, it would let me pet it. And even on days when it didn't, it never scratched me.

It was very different from Miyagi.

The calico continued to let me pet it. I'd always likened Miyagi to a stray cat, but now I knew that was an insult to actual stray cats.

They were much friendlier than she was.

Granted, the only person Miyagi was cold to was me.

But she wasn't completely heartless. She had a kind side too. Just the other day, she had taken care of me when I was down with a cold. Thanks to all the attention she gave me, my fever went down the very next day and I recovered in no time. It almost made me wish I were sick all the time.

"I wish you'd be nice to me even when I'm not sick, though."

I murmured — something I could never say to the person herself, but somehow felt fine saying to a cat.

Unlike Miyagi, the cat in front of me was very affectionate, and I could talk to it while gently stroking its back again and again. The calico seemed to be in an especially good mood today, because when I started petting the area around its neck, it rolled over and exposed its belly to me.

"Oh, you're so receptive."

I said as I stroked its fluffy belly.

It had a nice layer of fat on it — probably because it was finding food somewhere — and it felt wonderful to pet.

Speaking of which, Miyagi's stomach had felt really pleasant to touch too. She wasn't too thin or too chubby — just the right amount of softness under my hand.

If only she'd let me touch her more, I thought. But as if reading my mind, the calico suddenly bolted.

"So even real cats can tell when someone has ulterior motives, huh."

Once the cat was out of sight, I stood up and continued home. I made it back to the apartment in less than five minutes and opened the front door. The lights in the shared living space were off, but Miyagi's shoes were by the entrance. I went up to her bedroom door and knocked. She opened it almost immediately.

"I'm home. Do you want to start on dinner together?"

I asked, and Miyagi nodded.

I decided to make frozen shumai the main dish for dinner and dropped my bags off in my room before heading back to the kitchen. Miyagi was already prepping the ingredients for a Chinese-style bean sprout salad. I started slicing the cucumber and ham while she boiled the sprouts. By the time the shumai was spinning in the microwave, I had tossed everything into a bowl and dressed the salad.

Dinner was ready soon after, and we ate together.

After cleaning up our dishes, I brewed us some tea before we went back to my room. Miyagi sat down next to my bed, leaning her back against it. I placed two mugs on the table and sat down beside her.

I turned on the air conditioner and raised the temperature slightly.

It was almost July, and the weather had been getting warmer lately, but Miyagi often complained about how cold my room was. Since she'd been going out of her way to come hang out here more often, I figured I could compromise on this at least.

I took a sip of black tea from my mug.

Miyagi, sitting beside me, quietly sipped from hers too. Just like a stray cat, she was fairly docile whenever she was eating or drinking. I took another sip before reaching my hand out toward her — the same way I had with the calico earlier — though it felt like if I touched her anywhere, she would probably jolt upright and bite me.

"Miyagi."

"What?"

"If I asked for your permission to touch your stomach right now, would you let me?"

"Absolutely not."

Miyagi's voice was clearly grumpy as she set her mug back down on the table.

"Yeah, I figured. I just wanted to try asking anyway."

I hadn't expected her to let me.

I had no intention of doing anything she wouldn't like, and I didn't actually hope she'd say yes either. But still, I wished she were even half as friendly as the calico I'd seen earlier.

"You're such a pervert, Sendai-san. Don't say weird things out of nowhere."

Miyagi slid herself away from me.

"You know how there's a cat that hangs around our neighborhood?"

I didn't want her to run away like that cat had done, so I tried to explain myself.

"A cat? I don't think I've seen it."

"Huh? There's this calico I keep seeing on my way home from school… You've never run into it before?"

"No, but what does that have to do with you wanting to touch my stomach?"

"Well, that cat sometimes lets me rub its belly, so I thought I'd try and see if you'd let me do the same."

"What are you even talking about? I'm not a cat, you know. And if that cat lets you rub its belly, then go rub its belly, not mine."

Miyagi — who was a lot like a stray cat — denied being one.

"Well, yeah, I know. But the cat's not always around."

It wasn't that I wanted to use Miyagi as a substitute for the cat.

If I was being honest, it was her I wanted to touch.

And truthfully, it didn't even have to be her stomach either.

"I'll consider it if you let me touch your stomach too, Sendai-san."

"Okay."

Miyagi didn’t sound serious, but I responded seriously anyway.

"Huh?"

"So you’ll let me touch your stomach in exchange, right?"

"You know what, never mind. You’re such a pervert. Get away from me."

Miyagi frowned and tried to push me away by the shoulders.

She was being so mean to me, even though she was the one who had brought up the idea of a trade in the first place.

Plus, considering everything Miyagi had done to me before, she definitely deserved being called a “pervert” more than I did. I had never ordered her to lick my feet before, nor had I ever tried tying her wrists together.

Just what does Miyagi think of me, anyway?

I was really curious how she saw me. But if I asked her directly, she would definitely just call me a pervert. So instead, I decided to ask a different question that might give me a rough idea.

"Hey, Miyagi. If I were an animal, what would I be?"

"Why are you asking all of a sudden?"

"Just for fun. It’s not like we have anything else to talk about, so answer the question."

"You’d be a dog."

Miyagi responded coldly.

It didn’t seem like she had thought very hard about it.

"Why do you think I’d be a dog?"

"Because you obey my orders."

As expected, her reasoning was simple.

Since I had obeyed all of her orders so far, I wasn't surprised she picked an obedient animal. But I didn't particularly like the answer.

"A dog, huh. Like a poodle or a corgi or something?"

"No. Why are you only listing the cute breeds?"

"I don't know. Being cute is better, isn't it?"

"You're not one of those cute breeds, Sendai-san. You're more like a big dog."

"Like a large breed?"

"Yep."

"Do you have any examples?"

I could understand why she thought I was a dog, but I hadn't expected her to think of me as a large breed. I wasn't that tall, so I was curious what kind of dog she had in mind — but she wouldn't answer.

"Do you have a specific breed in mind?"

I asked again, and Miyagi answered as if she had no other choice.

"Like one of those dogs with a really thin face and body."

I wasn't sure what kind of breed she meant.

Or maybe she was thinking of a specific character?

"Are there really dogs like that?"

"There are. I've seen them on TV before."

"I can't think of any breeds like that, though."

"Let me use your tablet for a second."

I handed Miyagi the tablet, and she began searching for something.

After a moment, she said, “Here, this one,” and showed me the screen.

I stared at the tablet in her hands. Unlike a Siberian husky or a golden retriever, it was a breed I didn’t recognize. Just as Miyagi had said, the dog had a slender face and body. Its ears drooped, and its legs and body were unusually long. Its fur was white with brown patches here and there.

Apparently, the breed was called a “borzoi,” but I had never heard of it before.

"It looks like such a noble, aristocratic breed… Am I really like that?"

Rather than “cute,” the word “beautiful” fit it better. It had a noble air about it too. Seeing that, I couldn’t bring myself to tell Miyagi I had compared her to a stray cat — it felt too cruel.

"I only thought of it because you’re taller than me."

It was true I was taller than Miyagi, but not by that much. If anything, I felt more like a medium-sized dog. I couldn’t imagine myself as a borzoi.

"You say that, but I bet I’m only about four or five centimeters taller than you."

"How tall are you, Sendai-san?"

"163 centimeters. What about you?"

"I’m 157 centimeters."

"Well, I don’t think a six-centimeter difference is enough to make me a large dog."

"No, you’re definitely a large dog."

Miyagi mumbled, closing the borzoi photo. Then she added, “It just kind of reminded me of you.”

How Miyagi Sees Me (II)

Part 161

I picked up my mug and stared at what was left in it — a little less than half.

Miyagi would never come into my room, let alone stay here, without a reason.

Right now, the only reason she was sitting beside me was because we were having tea together. Once we finished, she'd go straight back to her own room.

"You really like animals, huh, Miyagi?"

I asked as I took another slow sip and set my mug back down on the table.

I wasn't sure how much tea Miyagi still had in her cup, but I knew she wouldn't leave until I was done with mine.

"It's not like I like them or anything…"

"Really? But you seem to know a lot of dog breeds. I'd never even heard of borzois until today. Plus, you bought a crocodile and a platypus tissue box cover."

I said as I pulled the platypus tissue box — which had originally been meant for the dining area — closer to me and stroked its head. A hand reached out beside me and pulled a tissue from it.

"All of those things are just coincidences."

I couldn't tell from her cold tone whether she truly thought knowing about borzois and buying animal-themed tissue boxes were coincidences, but there was no way she'd remember such details if she didn't like animals at all. And I doubted she'd pick animal-themed designs if she had no fondness for them at all.

"Well, do you at least have a favorite animal? Like, what do you

think of dogs?"

"I think they're okay. What about you, Sendai-san?"

I set my mug back down on the table and stared at the cat-like Miyagi as I answered:

"I think I like cats more."

"Really? I thought you'd prefer dogs, considering you're like one yourself."

Miyagi said as she pulled another tissue from the box and started rolling the two sheets together into a ball.

"I don't think I'm that doglike."

"I think you are."

She said firmly, tossing the ball of tissue toward the trash can.

Plop.

The ball bounced off the rim and landed on the floor.

"Go get it, Sendai-san."

Miyagi pointed at the ball as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"I'm not doing that."

"Fine. I just wanted to see if you would."

She said curtly, showing no intention of getting up. Naturally, the tissue ball wasn't going to throw itself away.

"Come on, Miyagi. Throw it away properly."

"If you want it gone that badly, then do it yourself."

She spoke without looking at me, clearly in a bad mood.

She had no intention of picking it up herself. I didn't want to

indulge her by acting like a dog for her amusement, but I reluctantly stood and went to pick the ball up anyway.

"Alright. Here you go. Are you satisfied now?"

I asked as I handed the lump back to Miyagi.

"No."

She said, placing the tissue ball back on the floor.

"What, is there something else you want me to do?"

"Here. Paw."

Miyagi extended her hand toward me, commanding me as if I were a dog.

This is ridiculous.

There's no reason I have to play along with this.

I thought that — and then reconsidered.

I did as I was told and gave Miyagi my right hand, placing it on her palm. Then I grabbed her hand and tugged her toward me. Caught off guard, Miyagi stumbled forward and leaned into my body, and I held her close.

"You can order me around even more if you want."

Feeling her warmth and body pressed against me made my heart race, but I pretended not to notice.

"No. And that wasn't meant to be an order, so let go of me."

Miyagi said, clearly annoyed, trying to push me away — but I had no intention of letting go.

"You were basically ordering me around. Look, I'll do anything you ask right now except let go of you. So just give me an order."

Miyagi fell silent, not saying a word.

I was happy just being this close to her, so it didn't matter to me whether she gave me an order or not. As long as she stayed hesitant, we'd remain pressed together like this.

"Miyagi."

I whispered softly into her ear, and she quietly replied,

"… Fine, then let me touch your stomach."

Before I could respond, Miyagi touched my stomach over my shirt. Startled by how unexpected it was, I instinctively pushed her away — even though I was the one who'd pulled her close — but her hands clung stubbornly to my clothes.

"What kind of order is that?"

"You said it yourself earlier, didn't you? That you'd let me touch your stomach."

She tugged on my shirt with a dissatisfied look.

She was right. Earlier, she'd said she'd consider letting me touch her stomach if I let her touch mine, and I'd agreed. I just hadn't thought she was serious.

I was surprised she'd meant it, but I didn't mind her touching me a few times — as long as she was still willing to hold up her end of the deal.

"If I'm allowed to touch your stomach afterwards too, then go ahead."

"No. Only I'm going to touch your stomach. I'm not letting you touch mine. You were the one who wanted me to order you around, so do as I say."

It was selfish and childish of her to expect me to obey without keeping the deal she'd proposed, so I had no reason to listen.

I knew that.

Yet I couldn't bring myself to refuse Miyagi.

"… Okay, fine. If you want to, then go ahead and touch me."

It was a habit I'd picked up back in high school — no matter what Miyagi wanted, good or bad, I always ended up listening to her.

In any case, I knew Miyagi was cowardly. She'd probably just touch me a little before backing off.

"So? What are you going to do?"

I asked. Miyagi let go of my clothes, then slowly slid her hand under them and began patting my stomach like a child playing with a stuffed animal.

I felt like I was being treated like a dog, but at the same time, I was happy she was showing any kind of interest in me.

"Having fun?"

I asked, and she replied quietly without lifting her gaze.

"It's alright."

Despite her indifferent tone, she kept touching my stomach. Her hand brushing my side tickled, but her warmth against my skin felt pleasant.

I'd expected her to back away immediately, but she didn't. Her touch continued, shifting from playful to delicate — no longer like she was handling a toy, but more like she was caressing a sheet of fine fabric. Her fingertips slid up my side, slowly working their way higher. The soft brushing started to elicit sensations that went beyond mere ticklishness.

The distance between us didn't change.

There was still space between our bodies — with only Miyagi's hand pressed close against me.

It slid up beneath my chest, then began to drift lower.

"… Don't you think the way you're touching me is kind of erotic?"

Her touch was loosening the screws holding my rationality together,

making me want to do things to her that she probably wouldn't want. I didn't mind her continuing, but if things kept going this way, it wouldn't end well for her.

"It's not erotic."

She said firmly, moving her hand, which had just been above my hipbone. I caught it before it could go further.

"Hey, it's kind of uncomfortable when you press down on my stomach like that right after I've eaten."

She hadn't pressed hard enough to make the food come back up, but I still didn't want her touching me like that.

"Fine, then let go of me."

I did as I was told, and she resumed touching me just as before.

I wanted to know if she felt good touching me — the same way I did when I touched her — and whether she wanted to touch me even more. And I wanted to know why she wanted to touch me at all.

But I didn't have the chance to ask.

Miyagi's hand reached just below my chest, brushing the edge of my undergarments. It stopped there, unmoving. It didn't seem like she intended to go any further, but it was probably best to stop her before I lost the last of my self-control.

"That's not my stomach anymore, Miyagi."

I said, grabbing her hand tightly over my clothes.

"You're the one who said I could touch you, so what are you complaining about now?"

She grumbled.

"If you want to keep touching me, fine. Go ahead. But I won't care about what happens next."

"What happens next?"

"What I'm saying is, I won't care about what happens to you next, Miyagi."

I said, gently tugging on her hair as she kept her head down.

She hadn't looked at me once this whole time, but now she finally lifted her head, and our eyes met.

I leaned in and ran my tongue across her cheek like a dog.

"If you keep this up, I'm going to lose control of myself."

I whispered into her ear. As soon as I let go of her hand, she yanked it out from under my clothes in a panic.

"You pervert. I'm going back to my room."

Miyagi — who had been acting far more perverted than I was — said, hitting me with the platypus tissue box on the floor.

"Wait, I'm not done with my tea yet."

I said, slowly sipping the cooled tea.

Miyagi wiped her cheek with a tissue. She didn't leave the room, nor did she ask me to make any promises on her earrings. But she was staring down at the floor again, and I couldn't make out the expression on her face.

"Sendai-san."

"What is it?"

"… What kind of animal do you think I would be?"

She asked quietly.

"Hmm, a cat, I guess?"

I decided to leave the "stray" part out.

"Why a cat?"

"You get cold pretty easily. I bet if we got a kotatsu, you'd stay

under it all day."

I said, trying to give a safe explanation, then added,

"Do you want to buy a kotatsu when winter comes?"

"Absolutely not."

Miyagi answered immediately with exactly what I'd expected, and I finished the rest of my tea.

How Miyagi Sees Me (III)

Part 162

"Is there really a cat that comes by here? Let's just go home already. I don't really care about seeing it anyway."

Miyagi said in a grumpy tone, even though we'd only been standing outside for fifteen minutes.

I was the one who had suggested looking for the cat. She'd been reluctant from the very beginning.

"It's not like you've got anything to do even if we rush home. Come on, accompany me just a little longer."

I said, trying to encourage Miyagi as we walked beneath the shade of the trees.

We walked down the sidewalk together, but there was no sign of the calico cat anywhere—not by the curb, nor lurking in the shadows of the parked cars.

Well, not that I'd expected to see it today anyway.

I usually only saw the calico cat on my way home from campus, so I wasn't sure it would even be around on a Sunday afternoon like this.

"And how long is that supposed to be?"

"Just a little longer."

Even when she had all the time in the world, Miyagi never went out with me unless there was a reason for it. If there wasn't something we needed to buy, she wouldn't come shopping with me. If there wasn't something she particularly wanted to eat, the idea of going out for a meal wouldn't even cross her mind.

There always had to be some kind of excuse for us to go anywhere together.

So today, just to indulge my selfish desire to spend time with her outside, I made up a flimsy excuse: I asked her to come with me to look for the cat I sometimes saw around the neighborhood.

I wished I didn't have to come up with reasons. I wished that simply wanting to be with her could be reason enough.

I bet when it came to Utsunomiya, Miyagi would hang out with her without needing a reason at all. But I wasn't Utsunomiya, and I didn't want to be her either.

I looked up at the sky.

The sun blazed so brightly it was hard to believe the rainy season hadn't ended yet. As we walked along the still streets where even the trees didn't stir, I couldn't help thinking I'd rather be inside than out here.

But I wanted to stretch this moment out just a little longer.

If it were midsummer, I probably would've shriveled up and collapsed by now, but the heat wasn't that bad today, so we continued looking for the cat.

"Sendai-san, I thought you said we'd only be searching around our neighborhood. You liar."

Miyagi said as she gave my shoulder a firm push.

The place where I usually spotted the calico cat was only five minutes away from our apartment.

We'd been wandering around aimlessly for about fifteen minutes since we left home, so we were definitely farther than we needed to be.

"I guess I did say that, huh. But your outfit's so cute today, so isn't it fine if we just go for a little walk?"

It was warm today—perfect weather for wearing a skirt.

After some strong encouragement from me, Miyagi ended up wearing one just like mine.

It was a shame I couldn't get her to let me put makeup on her, but I was still satisfied that I'd managed to get her to wear such a cute outfit today.

"You're the one who made me wear this, you know."

"Yeah, I know. If we walk a little more, we'll be at a family restaurant soon. Do you want to stop by?"

"No, it's too hot out today. I want to go home."

She wasn't frowning, but her voice was quiet.

She seemed eager to go home already, and I couldn't help but think she was being stingy.

"Fine. We don't have to go to the family restaurant, but let's look around a little more. The cat is really cute, and it'll even let you pet it on a good day."

Even though Miyagi was ready to go home, I wasn't.

"Does the cat even exist?"

"It does. I swear."

But it probably wasn't going to show up today.

We'd wandered quite a ways off from where I usually saw that calico cat.

It wasn't exactly the right time of day either.

Maybe the cat showed up around here sometimes, or maybe it only came out earlier in the day—but either way, the chances of finding it now seemed low.

I felt a little dishonest.

I was making Miyagi do something I already knew had a low chance of happening.

But I should be allowed to get away with a small lie like this.

I wasn't exactly toning things down all that much, but I had been holding myself back and playing the part of an ordinary roommate.

I respected Miyagi's boundaries most of the time, so I felt like it was okay to indulge myself like this every once in a while.

"Oh yeah, do borzois usually go on walks out on the streets like this?"

I asked Miyagi, whose walking pace had noticeably slowed down, trying to cut in before she could say she wanted to go home.

"I think they do. Why?"

"I don't think I've ever seen a borzoi before in my life, let alone one on a walk."

"Neither have I."

"I see."

Our conversation came to an abrupt end, and I turned my gaze toward the other side of the road.

There were no borzois, nor calico cats to be seen.

As I searched for another conversation topic to keep her from saying she wanted to go home, I thought of university and our home life before blurting out a name that suddenly came to mind.

"Oh, right. When is Utsunomiya supposed to be coming over again?"

"… I haven't decided yet."

Miyagi said in a voice so quiet it was almost drowned out by the sounds of children nearby.

"It's almost July. You should hurry up and pick a day already."

"Sendai-san, the other day, you said you were basically free whenever, right? Is that still true?"

The tone in Miyagi's voice made it sound like she wanted me to say

I wasn't free—or better yet, that I didn't want Utsunomiya to come over at all.

But I had no intention of saying either of those things. Instead, I responded with something that was sure to disappoint her.

"Yeah, I'm free whenever. Oh, but I guess I'd prefer if she came next Sunday, since our exams are at the end of July."

"… Okay."

"So, when are you going to have her over?"

"I'll ask Maika first and see what she thinks."

Miyagi answered without a hint of hesitation, as if my opinion didn't matter in the slightest.

Even if she had no intention of considering my input, she'd probably decide on next Sunday anyway, since we all had exams at the end of July.

Still, the way she cared so much about what Utsunomiya thought left a faint, unpleasant heaviness in my chest.

I knew Miyagi was the type to accommodate her friends, but knowing that didn't make me feel any better.

"Okay, let me know once you two have decided, then."

I said, taking a step forward to drag my thoughts back up from the dark, heavy place they were sinking into.

Right, left, right.

I took slow steps forward, one after another.

Miyagi walked beside me, the pale color of her skirt swaying softly with every step.

She could wear whatever she liked, but if it were up to me, I'd want her in something that let me see her legs beneath her skirt.

I'd never thought of myself as someone with a thing for legs or feet,

but given everything that had happened, it wouldn't be strange if I'd ended up developing one—thanks to all the orders Miyagi made me obey.

"What are you looking at, Sendai-san?"

Your legs.

She'd probably kick me if I said that out loud, though.

"Just at the tiles on the sidewalk."

I answered with something that was close enough to where her legs were and lifted my gaze.

"Having fun?"

"Yep."

— It's more fun than having to think about your relationship with Utsunomiya, that's for sure.

I kept what I really wanted to say to myself and looked straight ahead.

I couldn't just keep staring at her legs forever.

But there wasn't much to look at in front of me, so I turned to Miyagi instead.

She didn't seem all that enthusiastic about walking, but her arms moved in rhythm with her steps.

"Miyagi."

"What is it?"

"Wanna hold hands?"

I asked as I poked one of Miyagi's moving arms.

"No."

"Why not?"

"It’s too hot out."

"Does that mean you’ll let me hold your hand when we get home?"

"That’s not what I meant."

Her answer was exactly what I expected—and honestly, I preferred it that way. It would’ve felt weird if she’d said anything else.

"I don’t think the cat’s showing up today anyway, so shall we go home?"

"Didn’t you want to look around a little longer?"

"Yeah, maybe if it were a bit cooler out today. I think it’s better if we just went home."

It was a shame I couldn’t show Miyagi the calico cat—who was even friendlier than she was—but I doubted we’d find it even if we kept searching, so I turned around and started walking home.

"Fine. Whatever you want."

She said in a cold tone.

I quickened my pace.

Miyagi matched it, walking right beside me.

I just wanted to get home sooner.

Not that holding hands at home would change anything, anyway.

Chapter 55

Sendai-san and the Calico Cat (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 163

It's not here today either, huh.

These days, I found myself glancing around on my way home from university, careful not to look suspicious, hoping to catch sight of the calico cat Sendai-san had talked about—but without any luck.

"She wasn't lying to me about the cat, was she?"

I was starting to think that maybe the cat didn't actually exist, though I couldn't think of any reason for Sendai-san to make something like that up. If that were true, then the cat really did exist somewhere—it just didn't want to show itself to me.

That thought annoyed me.

It was mean of the cat to show itself to Sendai-san but not to me.

I quickened my pace and climbed the stairs. After going up three flights, I reached the front door, opened it, and took off my shoes.

Sendai-san's shoes weren't by the entrance, and naturally, she wasn't home either.

I was usually the first one back, so I was used to opening the door to an empty apartment. Things had been that way ever since I was a child.

It had always been normal for me to say, "I'm home," and hear no response.

Until Sendai-san started coming over to my place, being alone was my normal—to the point that I'd almost forgotten what loneliness felt like.

But these days, I felt lonely whenever I was by myself for too long.

That was how much Sendai-san had become part of my life.

The emotions she'd brought with her were ones I'd never known when I was alone—and some of them were honestly annoying.

I sighed and headed to my room.

Picking up the black cat plush that had been lounging on my bookshelf, I climbed into bed with it.

Sendai-san was off work today, so she'd be home early.

The thought of her stopping to pet the calico cat before coming back made my heart uneasy.

I stroked the black cat plush's belly.

It felt nothing like Sendai-san's.

The thing in my hands was just a stuffed animal. Sendai-san was a real person.

Her body was warm, and she obviously didn't have cotton stuffed inside her. When I placed my hand on her stomach, it would rise and fall with her breathing, and if I pressed too hard, she'd complain. It was much more interesting than touching a stuffed animal.

If she'd let me, I'd want to touch her stomach again.

That said, I hadn't had the chance since then, so for now, I had to settle for the plush.

I gave the black cat's belly a squeeze.

It wasn't a squeaky toy, so its body only bent a little, and nothing else happened. Its face stayed exactly the same as when I'd been stroking it gently.

"How boring."

I placed the black cat plush on my stomach and stroked its head.

Sendai-san had said that she liked cats.

Ever since the day she mentioned that, I couldn't help but wonder if there was some hidden meaning behind her giving me this cat plush for Christmas.

… No, there was no way.

From my bed, I glanced at the tissue box with the crocodile cover.

Sendai-san had said back then that the black cat plush was supposed to be the crocodile's friend.

That was all there was to it. It was nothing more than an ordinary stuffed animal.

And even if there had been some kind of meaning behind it, it was far too late to ask about it now.

Every day, the things I wanted to know about Sendai-san kept growing—and that was all.

Most of the things I wanted to know, I never ended up finding out. Instead, I learned other things about her.

Things like how she liked cats more than dogs—so much that she'd actually go out looking for them.

Or how her stomach felt even nicer to touch than all the times I'd touched her before.

Though they weren't the things I wanted to know, the small things I did learn about her made the frustration of not knowing what I really wanted to a little easier to bear.

I sat up on my bed.

I still had some assignments to take care of today.

I'd been under the impression that university students spent their days hanging out with friends or just lazing around, but that didn't seem to be the case. Things might change once I reached my second

or third year, but even as a first-year student, I already had more to do than I'd expected.

I'd thought I could get through university by slacking off whenever I wanted—but I was very wrong.

I didn't have time to just laze around forever.

Reluctantly, I pulled out my laptop and turned it on. After setting out the papers I needed for my homework, I began typing, but about thirty minutes later, there was a knock at my door, followed by Sendai-san's gentle voice.

"You there, Miyagi?"

I stood up and opened the door. Before I could even say anything, she greeted me with, "I'm home."

"Welcome home."

"I'm hungry. Wanna have something simple for dinner today?"

"Sure."

There were so many things I wanted to ask her, but none of the words came out. As usual, I just went along with her.

I left my room and walked over to where Sendai-san was standing by the dining table.

"So, is Utsunomiya actually coming over?"

"Yeah."

We'd agreed she would come on Sunday afternoon—the day after tomorrow.

To be honest, I didn't like the idea of Maika and Sendai-san being in the same room together. Seeing them side by side filled me with an indescribable feeling, like paint dissolving in water. But I'd promised Maika last month, so there was no backing out now.

"Sendai-san, please make sure you don't say anything weird to her."

I warned her, since she could be unpredictable. I doubted she'd touch me in front of Maika, but I was afraid she might say something that didn't need to be said.

"Of course I wouldn't. I'm not going to do anything that'd cause trouble for you."

"I don't believe that at all."

"Well, in that case, do you want me to swear on your earrings?"

Sendai-san said, touching my ear.

Her fingertips brushed my earlobe, ticklish enough to make me try to push her away, but she didn't budge.

"Not right now."

"Why not?"

As she spoke, her fingers traced along my earring, then slipped behind my ear. There was something in her touch that felt like more than a simple promise, and my heart started pounding harder. I knew I was probably just being overly conscious of her, but I couldn't help focusing on my ear.

Even though I'd told her not to swear on my earrings right now, Sendai-san leaned in close anyway. Her warm breath brushed against the edge of my ear, and I kicked her in the leg.

"Ow, that hurt."

Sendai-san pulled her hand away from my ear and stepped back.

"I made sure to kick you hard enough so it would hurt."

"Come on, you should've held back a little."

"If I had held back, you wouldn't have let go."

"Well, I guess that's true. Anyway, are you sure you don't want me to swear on your earrings?"

"If I made you do that now, you'd probably turn around on the day

of and say the promise expired the moment Maika showed up. So no, I'll have you promise me on Sunday morning instead."

I was the one who decided the details of our promises and when she had to make them. If I let my guard down even a little, Sendai-san would definitely try to add or remove conditions without my permission.

"You still don't trust me at all, huh."

Sendai-san said in a dissatisfied tone as she opened the refrigerator.

"Maybe I'd trust you a bit more if the cat had actually been there."

I trusted her more than I used to, but I still couldn't bring myself to trust her completely.

"Are you talking about the calico cat in our neighborhood?"

She asked, closing the refrigerator door.

"Yeah. I still haven't seen it yet."

"… I swear it really exists, okay?"

Sendai-san said, probably noticing the doubt in my voice, with a slightly troubled look on her face. Then she added, "Anyway, wanna have omelette rice today?"

Sendai-san and the Calico Cat (II)

Part 164

My feet felt heavy as I dragged them toward the train station.

The reason for that was simple—it was where I was supposed to meet Maika.

Hoping to distract myself from my thoughts, I looked around for the calico cat, but it was nowhere to be seen.

I hadn't meant to walk so quickly, but before I realized it, I'd already arrived at the station. I waited around aimlessly for a while, unsure of what to do, until I heard Maika's voice.

"Sorry, Shiori. Did you wait long?"

"No, I just got here."

"You didn't have to come pick me up, you know."

"The station's close enough anyway, so it's fine."

The apartment wasn't so far from the station that she'd get lost on her own, but I felt more at ease picking her up myself.

"Shall we go?"

I said, and we started walking together.

"Are you feeling alright?"

I'd been nodding along as Maika talked when she suddenly asked in a worried tone.

"Yeah, it's just a little hot today."

I couldn't tell her the real reason, so I went with an excuse.

The thought of Maika coming to the apartment I shared with

Sendai-san made me uneasy and weighed heavily on my chest.

"Sendai-san's going to be there today too, right?"

Maika asked as we walked together under the shade.

"Yeah. She seemed really excited to make pancakes for us."

Since Maika had said she wanted to see Sendai-san, she was waiting for us at home.

"She's making us pancakes? Is Sendai-san a good cook?"

"I think she is."

I always found Sendai-san's cooking delicious, so other people probably would too.

Still, a small part of me didn't want Maika to taste it. I knew I was being narrow-minded, but I didn't know how to handle those feelings quietly. Maika was an important friend, someone I wanted to stay close with for a long time, which made me hate myself even more for thinking that way.

"Having you guys go out of your way to make something for me makes me feel excited, like I'm a proper guest in your home."

Maika said cheerfully.

I should have felt just as happy as she did, but I couldn't. All I could do was force a smile and try to sound cheerful in return.

"You're not like a proper guest—you actually are one. So let us treat you well today."

"Okay, sounds good!"

Maika replied brightly.

Even as we chatted about trivial things, my feet kept moving, and step by step, we drew closer to my apartment.

Since we were walking toward the apartment, it was only natural that we were getting closer to it, but I would've much rather had us

walking away instead. There was a certain heaviness in my feet, as if they were being weighed down by something.

Sendai-san had sworn on my earrings earlier that she wouldn't say anything strange in front of Maika, so I shouldn't have to worry about her. Maika wasn't usually the type to say anything meddlesome either, so there was no real reason to be uneasy—yet I couldn't help it. She was oddly sharp when it came to things involving Sendai-san, and that made me nervous.

No, it'll be fine. Everything will be fine.

I kept repeating the words in my head like a spell when Maika suddenly stopped and said, "Oh, a cat."

"Huh? A cat?"

"Look, over there."

She pointed ahead, toward a shaded spot along the street. When I followed her gaze, I saw it—a cat with a coat of three colors.

"Oh, so there really was a cat…"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Sendai-san told me there was a cat that liked to hang around this neighborhood, but I'd never seen it before. It wasn't there when we went out looking for it the other day either."

"You and Sendai-san went out searching for a cat together?"

Maika's question made me realize I'd said something I probably shouldn't have.

Sendai-san didn't seem like the kind of person who'd go out of her way to look for a cat, but that was what happened. It wasn't strange, and there was nothing wrong with telling Maika about it.

Conversations like this were normal—I knew that.

Still, talking to Maika about something I'd done with Sendai-san made my thoughts start to come apart.

It wasn't like going out to look for a cat together was anything unusual, yet for some reason, it felt like something I needed to keep to myself.

"Yeah. Sendai-san suddenly suggested it last Sunday, so we went."

I tried to say as casually as possible.

"Do you and Sendai-san usually do things like that together?"

Before I could answer, Maika crouched down and called softly to the cat, but it didn't move. It stayed sprawled under the shade, ignoring her.

As I watched the cat, I dragged out the pointless conversation we were having.

"No, we just went out on a whim. It was only because I'd said I'd never seen the cat before."

The cat's ears flinched, though it probably wasn't reacting to me.

"You two get along pretty well, huh. I mean, that practically counts as a date, doesn't it?"

"It's not like I'd ever end up on a date with Sendai-san. And searching for a cat doesn't count as a date anyway."

I raised my voice a little without meaning to, and as if reacting to it, the cat suddenly stood up and bolted away.

"Aww, it ran off."

Maika said as the cat darted past us.

"And I wanted to pet it too."

Maika sounded disappointed as we started walking again.

Even though the cat sometimes let Sendai-san pet it, it wouldn't let us do the same.

What a stingy cat. How unfriendly.

As I was thinking this, Maika turned to me.

"Oh yeah, about what we were talking about earlier… Going out to look for a cat on your day off kind of sounds like something a couple living together would do for fun, doesn't it?"

After the cat ran away and we got closer to home, I had thought we could move on to another topic, but Maika deliberately brought it back. I didn't really feel like continuing it, but if I tried to change the subject, it would seem like I had something to hide, so I answered her.

"I don't think so. If the person you lived with asked to go look for a cat together, would you really call that a date? I would just think we were looking for a cat, not going on a date."

"If two people who live together go out together, even if it's just to look for a cat, it can count as a date, you know."

Maika replied, then immediately added, "Well, not that I'd know, since I don't have anyone like that."

"Oh, right—speaking of dates. Remember Ami? Apparently she and her boyfriend broke up."

That brought the topic of Sendai-san to an end, and we started talking about Ami, who'd stayed back in our hometown. We reached my apartment in less than five minutes, and after taking off our shoes, Maika and I stepped into the shared living space, where Sendai-san stood holding a bowl.

"We're back."

"Oh, welcome back."

"You're just starting on the pancakes now?"

"Yeah. They taste better when they're freshly made, so I was waiting for you two to get here."

Sendai-san cracked an egg as she turned to greet Maika.

"It's been a while."

"Yeah, last time we saw each other was during the runaway incident."

Maika said fondly, and Sendai-san laughed.

"You really helped me out back then. If something like that happens again, I'll be counting on you."

"I wasn't running away from anything. I just stayed at Maika's place for a while, so stop calling it an incident."

How rude.

It hadn't been anything dramatic—just me taking shelter at a friend's house for a little while. I'd intended to return soon, but those two had a habit of blowing small things out of proportion.

"Oh, right. I brought you two something."

After the greetings, Maika handed Sendai-san a small bag.

"Thank you. You didn't have to bring us anything."

"Don't worry, it's nothing special. Just some cookies, so you two can eat them together."

Maika said, shooting a smile at me.

I wanted to correct her and say I was going to eat them by myself, but there was no point in doing so.

"Thanks."

Instead, I simply thanked her without saying more than I needed to.

"Okay, I'm going to make the pancakes now, so you two can feel free to head to another room and talk among yourselves."

"Oh, let us help you with that."

Maika said, as we watched Sendai-san mix the contents in the bowl.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine on my own. You wanted to see Miyagi's new room, right? Besides, I feel like Miyagi would just get in the

way if she helped, so take her away somewhere else with you."

Sendai-san said something so rude, I wanted to kick her, but I held back. Back in high school, I might've gotten in the way, but now I was actually somewhat useful in the kitchen.

"Okay, I'll take Shiori away then. Which room are we going to?"

I wanted to protest, but Maika pulled me by the arm, and I led her to my room.

I didn't stand a chance against the two of them.

Somehow, they seemed perfectly in sync—not that they'd planned this or anything, but they just bounced off each other smoothly.

"Your room's a little smaller than before, but it feels exactly like I remember."

Maika said as soon as we entered.

"Well, I brought just about everything with me besides the large furniture."

"Oh, even the crocodile tissue box is here!"

"Yep. Why don't you take a seat over there for now?"

I said to Maika, who was checking out my slightly smaller room, and she sat across from me.

We'd already talked plenty about what it was like to live with someone, and aside from Sendai-san, there wasn't much else to pique Maika's curiosity. So without her around, our conversations were basically the same as whenever we were in class together.

I wish those pancakes never end up being ready, I thought to myself.

But of course, that wasn't going to happen.

Knock, knock.

Somewhere in the middle of chatting with Maika, there were two

knocks at the door.

It was Sendai-san, and I stepped outside.

"The pancakes are done now… What do you want to do?"

Sendai-san asked in a gentle tone as a sweet smell filled the air.

I didn't want to let Sendai-san into my room.

I just didn't want today to be the first time. She'd never been in there before, and if I was going to let her in, I wanted it to be on some other day—when Maika wasn't around.

Ideally, I'd have preferred to eat the pancakes in the shared living space, but I was worried Maika might find that strange.

As I hesitated, Maika opened my bedroom door and peeked her head out.

"Is something wrong?"

"The pancakes are ready."

I replied, still unsure, and she said, "I'll help you bring the plates over," as if assuming we'd be eating in my room.

What should I do?

I couldn't bring myself to tell her not to help.

I looked over at Sendai-san, lost for words.

"Oh, right."

She said, as if something had suddenly come to mind.

"Do you want to see my room too, Utsunomiya?"

"If that's okay with you, then of course!"

"Sure, then why don't we eat in my room instead?"

Sendai-san said with a smile.

Chapter 56

What Miyagi Wants to Know (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 165

"Whoa, your room's different than I expected. I thought it'd look more like a stereotypical university girl's room."

As soon as we entered, Utsunomiya said something that sounded familiar.

"Miyagi said something similar before."

The image Utsunomiya had of me in her head was probably still my high school self—the me that tried so hard to fit in with Umina's group—so it wasn't surprising she reacted the same way Miyagi did last year. Nowadays, even at university, I didn't bother putting up much of a front, so I hoped to update the image she had of me.

"She did? What'd she say?"

"What did I say?"

Miyagi asked, frowning slightly as she set her plate of pancakes and a glass of iced tea on the table before sitting down.

We each had brought our own items. I sat diagonally across from Miyagi, and Utsunomiya sat across from me.

"When you came over to my house last summer, you also said you expected it to look more like a stereotypical high school girl's room, didn't you?"

I'd blurted out something Miyagi probably didn't want me to say.

Utsunomiya already knew that Miyagi and I had been close since high school. Plus, the story we went with was that I'd helped Miyagi with her studies, so there was nothing strange about visiting each

other's homes.

The more lies we told, the more likely everything would unravel.

It seemed better to answer harmless questions honestly rather than continue hiding things.

I glanced at Miyagi, who was glaring at me, but I pretended not to notice.

"If you two were close enough to be visiting each other all the time, you should've told me sooner!"

"That's true. If you'd told her sooner, we could've had pancakes like this all the way back then, right, Miyagi?"

"Yeah, you're right."

Miyagi smiled faintly, then added,

"Shall we start eating now?"

"Yeah, let's do that before the pancakes get cold."

I replied, not wanting to bother her further.

The two of them echoed in unison, "Let's eat."

"Oh, these pancakes are so soft and delicious."

Utsunomiya said after taking a bite, smiling brightly at me.

"Thanks. I'm glad you think so."

I picked up my knife and fork to cut into my own pancake.

"I heard from Shiori that you're a good cook, Sendai-san. Do you enjoy cooking?"

"I wouldn't say I particularly like it or anything. Also, did you really say something like that, Miyagi?"

A good cook, huh.

I had no idea Miyagi thought that about me.

Well, not that I'd ever properly asked what she thought of me before. I'd only recently learned she thought I reminded her of borzois, but I'd never heard her say anything specific beyond that.

"Yeah, that's what Shiori told me on the way here."

"Oh, really? She's never said that to me before."

I glanced at Miyagi, who was seated diagonally across from me. She had a strange expression on her face—not quite a frown, but her temples looked like they might start twitching any second.

"I always tell you the food you make is delicious, don't I?"

Miyagi said curtly, and Utsunomiya giggled.

Since she wasn't denying it, what Utsunomiya said must've been true.

Miyagi had actually praised me to someone else.

That thought gave me a strange, ticklish feeling inside.

I took a bite of the fluffy pancakes in front of me.

The sweetness of the maple syrup soaking into the soft batter was delightful. I took another bite and glanced at Miyagi again. She was quietly eating her pancakes, not saying a word about how they tasted.

I wished she would, though.

As we ate, we chatted about places with good parfaits and things we'd recently bought. Miyagi was smiling at Utsunomiya with the same expression she used to wear back in high school.

My hand stopped midair, fork hovering over my plate.

It was a smile she'd never once directed at me.

"Sendai-san, are you seeing anyone right now?"

Utsunomiya suddenly brought up a topic Miyagi and I never talked about when we were alone.

"Nope. What about you, Utsunomiya?"

"Neither am I. What about you, Shiori?"

"Why are you asking me? You already know I'm not seeing anyone."

"Oh, well, you know, I was just going with the flow."

Utsunomiya said with a smile.

I was glad our guest of honor seemed to be enjoying herself, but it felt like her joy was taking years off Miyagi's life.

It wasn't great for my heart either.

"You didn't have to include me in that."

Miyagi sighed and took a sip of her iced tea.

It was refreshing, in a way, to talk about things like this with her—topics that never came up when it was just the two of us.

But a small part of me tensed up, afraid I might hear something I didn't want to.

Still, a few questions circled in my head. Things I'd never had the chance to ask, and things I might regret knowing once I did.

"Well, do you at least have a crush on anyone?"

My heart skipped a beat when Utsunomiya asked the question I'd secretly wanted to know myself.

"You already know the answer to that too, don't you? I don't have a crush on anyone."

Miyagi answered without hesitation.

Hearing the response I'd expected left me both relieved and disappointed. Her saying she didn't like anyone meant there was no chance it was me, but even if she had said she liked someone, I

probably wouldn't have believed it was me anyway. I'd just end up wondering who it was and feeling miserable. Either way, it'd hurt, so I always felt it was better not to know.

"What about you, Sendai-san? Do you have anyone you like?"

Utsunomiya asked, fixing her gaze on me.

Given how the conversation was going, I figured that question would come my way too.

Well, this puts me in a tough spot, I thought.

Admitting that I did would only complicate things, but denying it while Miyagi was here didn't sit right either.

"What about you, Utsunomiya?"

I replied with a question of my own for the time being.

If it were Miyagi, she would've complained about that, but Utsunomiya probably wouldn't, not with someone she wasn't that close to yet.

"I don't."

"I see. Do you and Miyagi always talk about things like this?"

"Not really, but I was curious how your roommate situation would work if one of you did have a partner."

"Well, we do have some rules for living together, but we've never discussed what we'd do if one of us got a partner. Maybe we should make some."

I'd never wanted to think about a day when those rules would actually matter, so I'd avoided bringing it up with Miyagi. But I couldn't tell Utsunomiya that, so I just went along with the conversation and glanced at Miyagi, who said, "Yeah, I guess we should."

"Oh, so you two actually have rules in place, huh."

Utsunomiya said with a satisfied tone, and the conversation came to

an end.

After finishing my pancakes, I looked over at Miyagi, who suddenly stood up.

"I'm going to the bathroom."

She said, sounding like she was fleeing from Utsunomiya.

I couldn't blame her.

If this went on, she might've ended up getting hit by another stray bullet.

"Okay."

I said, letting her go, knowing she'd probably take more damage if things kept going.

Alright, that leaves me alone with Utsunomiya.

Hmm, what should we talk about?

As I searched for harmless topics to bring up, I reached for the platypus tissue box and started absentmindedly stroking its head. Noticing this, Utsunomiya spoke up.

"That looks like the kind of thing you'd find in Shiori's room. Do you like stuff like that too, Sendai-san?"

"Oh, Miyagi's the one who picked it out."

I said, patting the tissue cover's head.

"No wonder it gives off such Shiori vibes."

The image of that crocodile tissue cover I'd seen countless times back in high school came to mind. I wasn't sure if Miyagi still had it in her room now, but considering Utsunomiya—who'd just been there earlier—said it gave off her vibe so casually, it was probably still around.

I'd wanted to see with my own eyes what Miyagi's room—the one that had always been off-limits to me—looked like, but there was

nothing I could do. It wasn't Utsunomiya's fault, though, and I still didn't know for sure if the crocodile was really there or not.

"You two are a lot closer than I thought."

Utsunomiya said while staring at the platypus.

"You even have something like that in your room."

"Well, we're close enough to be roommates."

"Yeah, true. You wouldn't be sharing a place if you didn't get along."

Utsunomiya said, taking a sip of her iced tea before looking directly at me.

"You're a lot easier to talk to than I expected, Sendai-san. You felt kind of unapproachable back in high school…"

"That was probably because I was always hanging out with Umina's group, right?"

"Yeah, something like that."

I thought so.

Umina had always been the flashy, attention-grabbing type—for better or worse—so a lot of students tended to avoid her. She was friendly, sure, but she never followed the rules, and the teachers often kept an eye on her. It wouldn't have been strange if people found me hard to approach just for being around her.

"Sendai-san, you said you used to help Shiori with her studies, right?"

Maybe feeling awkward for what could've sounded like badmouthing Umina, Utsunomiya switched topics.

"Yeah. It started as a way to thank her for lending me money. I hadn't planned on tutoring her for as long as I did, but I found Miyagi pretty unique and interesting to be around."

"Oh, I get that. It's probably because Shiori's so different from the people you used to hang around."

"I used to read a lot of manga in Miyagi's room, but Umina hardly had any in hers."

"Shiori's room does have a lot of manga, doesn't it?"

Utsunomiya said with a laugh.

Back then, I'd read almost every manga in Miyagi's room—a place that had felt strangely comfortable to be in. Even now, I still read the ones she brings over to my room sometimes, but I haven't chosen one from her bookshelf myself in a long time.

"And that's what led you two to become roommates, huh?"

"Well, living alone would've been pretty lonely. I just never imagined she'd tell you she was living with a relative, though."

"Yeah, I never would've guessed her roommate was you either, Sendai-san."

Utsunomiya laughed lightly, then let out a small sigh.

She looked like she wanted to say something, but lowered her gaze and sighed once more before finally speaking quietly.

"… To be honest, I was really shocked when I found out you were living with Shiori. She'd never mentioned you before, so I felt kind of like I was being left out. I know I'm just being immature, though."

She laughed awkwardly, then looked back up at me.

"Sorry for saying something weird."

"I don't think it's immature to feel that way. I'd feel left out too if the same thing happened to me, like my friend had just been taken away from me or something."

If anything, I was the one being immature.

Even though I was the one who invited her over, I hadn't felt genuinely happy about it. And even though I told her she could go into Miyagi's room, I hadn't actually wanted her to.

I wished I could come out and say what I was feeling the way Utsunomiya did, but that wasn't possible.

There was no way I could explain why I wasn't happy about her being here, or why I didn't want her in Miyagi's room.

I couldn't talk about these feelings with her—feelings I hadn't even admitted to the person they were about.

So instead, I said what I'd planned to tell Utsunomiya from the start.

"Oh, by the way, you can call me Hazuki if you want."

Miyagi always stubbornly refused to call me by my first name, but most of my friends did. I figured that if Utsunomiya did too, it'd make me feel like we'd gotten closer.

— In other words, I wanted to become close enough to her that I no longer felt jealous of her.

It was a selfish reason, but that wasn't all.

If we got along better, maybe we could become actual friends. And since she'd just opened up to me, that desire only got stronger.

"Hmm…"

Utsunomiya let out a soft groan, then straightened her posture.

"Shiori doesn't call you "Hazuki" either, so I think I'll keep calling you "Sendai-san" until she does. But you can call me by my first name if you want."

She said with a serious expression on her face, and seeing how much thought she'd put into her answer, I did the same.

"Then until you call me by my first name, I'll stick with Utsunomiya too."

"Yep, that sounds good."

She clapped her hands together lightly, as if wrapping up our talk. Then she followed up with, "Sendai-san."

"What's up?"

"Do you think we'll end up becoming good friends?"

"Yeah, of course."

I answered, and Utsunomiya smiled.

"That's good."

We both laughed—and just then, the door opened, and Miyagi walked back in.

"What were you two talking about?"

She asked as she sat diagonally across from me, glancing between us suspiciously.

"We were sharing all our secrets about you, Miyagi… Just kidding. We were just talking about how I ended up tutoring you back in high school."

"Is that true, Maika?"

Miyagi asked, still keeping her gaze fixed on me.

"Yeah, it's true. We weren't talking about anything serious."

Utsunomiya said with a light laugh.

What Miyagi Wants to Know (II)

Part 166

The three of us had gone out to eat, and I'd come back home with Miyagi.

And now, she was confronting me.

Utsunomiya, who'd been with us here just two hours ago, was already gone.

Miyagi had a difficult look on her face.

"So what did you and Maika actually talk about?"

She asked in a stern tone I doubted she'd ever used around Utsunomiya.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"You two were definitely talking about something while I was in the bathroom, weren't you?"

It was written all over her face that she wanted answers, and that she wasn't in a good mood.

Miyagi had been sitting diagonally in front of me earlier, but now she was right across from me, making her expression easy to read. The air around her felt sharp, almost prickling against my skin. I was glad the Miyagi I knew was back, but I wasn't exactly happy about her being in such a terrible mood.

"We weren't talking about anything serious. Utsunomiya said that too, didn't she?"

That was the truth—we really hadn't talked about anything serious.

It was normal to ask new friends to call each other by their first names, and it wasn't something I needed to hide. I'd decided to keep what Utsunomiya had confided in me to myself, but aside from that,

our conversation had been nothing out of the ordinary. It wasn't as if we'd agreed to keep anything secret from Miyagi either.

Still, I had a feeling that telling her what we'd talked about would only make her mood worse.

"That has to be a lie. You two were definitely talking about something."

"Are you doubting Utsunomiya?"

"No, I'm doubting you, Sendai-san."

Miyagi said firmly.

I couldn't help but think it was unfair that I was the only one she didn't believe.

I knew I'd never win against Utsunomiya when it came to trust, but even so, Miyagi was treating me far too coldly.

"All we talked about was how you picked out this platypus tissue box cover, and how I ended up helping you with your studies as a way to thank you for lending me money. I promised you I wouldn't say anything weird to her, so I made sure not to tell her anything you wouldn't want me to."

Hopefully, that was enough to dodge her question.

Miyagi didn't seem happy about me getting closer to Utsunomiya, so if I told her what we'd actually talked about, she'd probably think I was getting too friendly with her—or worse, that I was trying to steal her friend. I didn't want to say anything unnecessary and risk being misunderstood.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Besides, what do you think I could've said to her anyway?"

"Maybe you told her things I didn't want you to."

"Like what?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, don't you?"

Miyagi probably wanted to keep everything that happened between us in high school a secret from Utsunomiya. But I felt the same way. I didn't want anyone else to know either.

"You don't have to worry so much. We really were just having a normal conversation. And if you're that skeptical, you can ask Utsunomiya, too."

Miyagi lowered her eyes.

I wasn't sure what she was thinking, but she wouldn't look at me anymore.

I hadn't said anything suspicious, but I could still understand why she was bothered. Maybe, to her, I was getting a little too close to Utsunomiya. I wasn't trying to take her friend away, but it wouldn't be strange if she felt left out, the same way Utsunomiya said she did.

"— Look this way, Sendai-san."

After a long silence, Miyagi suddenly turned toward me and pulled me by the arm.

"I already am facing you, though."

I'd been looking at her the entire time, but my answer didn't please her. Her brows furrowed.

"No, face me properly."

She tugged my arm again. This time, I turned not just my face, but my whole body toward her.

"Is this alright?"

I asked, but she didn't respond. She didn't let go of my arm, either.

"Miyagi?"

When I called her name, the hand clutching my arm tightened. Then, Miyagi leaned closer.

She was probably going to kiss me.

Already expecting it, I closed my eyes, then felt something soft brush against my lips. I thought it would be a simple peck, but instead, something warm and damp pressed against me.

It was rare for Miyagi to be the one to initiate a kiss and try to slip her tongue inside my mouth.

The room hadn’t gotten any warmer, yet heat spread through my body.

I didn’t know why she was doing this, but my body moved before my thoughts could catch up. I parted my lips slightly, and after a moment of hesitation, Miyagi’s warmth slid into my mouth.

Our tongues met and intertwined.

Her gentle, uncertain movements fit naturally against mine, as if her tongue had always belonged there. The warmth of her lips, the faint tremor in her breath, all of it melted into me through every place we touched.

When I moved my tongue, wanting more, her grip on my arm tightened.

But then, her lips and tongue slipped away.

Still wanting to kiss her again, I leaned forward—only for her sharp, irritated voice to cut through the moment.

"Now tell me what you two were actually talking about."

Oh, right.

How could I forget?

Miyagi hardly ever kissed me unless she had a reason for it.

"Was that supposed to be a trade?"

I asked, saying the words she’d left unsaid.

"You can think of it like that."

She'd used kisses as bargaining chips before. It wasn't the first time we'd kissed like this, and we'd even gone further before. Even if it was part of a deal, I was still happy that Miyagi kissed me.

It didn't have to mean anything special.

And yet, this kiss felt different.

Maybe it was because—even though there was someone else she could've made a deal with—Miyagi had chosen me.

"Is there a reason why you're asking me and not Utsunomiya?"

I asked, and Miyagi's gaze dropped to the floor.

I wanted to know the reason if there was one, but she didn't reply.

"You could've asked Utsunomiya what we talked about and offered to buy her a meal or something. Actually, I bet she'd tell you even if you didn't give her anything in return."

"You don't know that. Maika might not tell me anything."

Miyagi mumbled, looking up at me.

That didn't sound convincing.

Knowing Utsunomiya, she definitely would've told Miyagi if she really wanted to know. If there was something she wouldn't say, then Miyagi could've asked me afterward.

There was no need for her to come to me first.

I wanted to believe she'd chosen to ask me because she wanted to kiss me. Maybe I was just twisting things to suit my own wishful thinking, but I couldn't help believing it anyway.

I kept searching for meaning in the fact that she'd chosen me instead of Utsunomiya to talk to first.

Even if she didn't feel the same way I did, I wanted to believe Miyagi felt at least something close to it.

"Now tell me, Sendai-san."

I didn't want to tell her.

Not yet, at least—not until she could explain clearly and convincingly why she'd chosen me.

But if I said that, Miyagi would probably drop it altogether.

"I'll tell you if you kiss me again."

I didn't mind if she used a kiss as a trade.

I just wanted her to be the one to initiate it again.

"Fine, I'll do it. But only if you swear on my earrings that you'll tell me everything after."

"Okay."

I reached out and traced the plumeria-shaped earring with my thumb, promising Miyagi that I'd tell her everything if she kissed me.

"Is this enough?"

I asked, sliding my hand from her earlobe to her cheek. Miyagi leaned in.

As soon as I closed my eyes, our lips met.

I hadn't added any conditions, but something soft slipped into my mouth anyway.

All I'd done was swear on her earrings, and Miyagi had kissed me again.

I wished she could always be this straightforward.

Though I knew that was asking for too much.

I wanted to be able to kiss Miyagi whenever I wanted, however I wanted.

Her hand brushed against my side.

She leaned in closer, pressing her lips more firmly against mine—but pulled away sooner than the last time.

"There. I kissed you."

Miyagi said flatly.

The only things I hadn't told her were what Utsunomiya had confided in me, and that I'd asked her to call me by my first name.

Utsunomiya hadn't made me promise not to tell Miyagi anything, but I didn't feel right about spilling someone else's secrets. That left me no choice but to tell Miyagi the other thing instead.

Still, I hesitated.

I didn't want Miyagi to misunderstand.

If she thought I was trying to take Utsunomiya away from her, she'd probably distance herself from me, and I didn't want that. Not even for a little while.

I didn't need her to like me, but I didn't want her to hate me either.

"Sendai-san."

Miyagi called my name firmly.

"You know, today, when I went to pick Maika up at the station, I finally saw that calico cat you were talking about. That made me realize you'd been telling the truth all along, and I felt like I could trust you a bit more. So I want you to show you can keep this promise, too."

Her voice was unusually serious, and I let out a small sigh.

I didn't want to lose what little trust I'd gained.

"We were talking about what to call each other."

"What do you mean?"

"I told her she could call me by my first name if she wanted to."

"… And did she?"

Miyagi asked, looking straight at me.

"Did you hear her call me by my first name today?"

"No, I didn't."

"Well, there you go. She said that until you start calling me by my first name, she'll hold off on it."

Miyagi fell silent.

She glanced at the floor, then back up at me.

"… So, are you going to call her by her first name too, Sendai-san?"

"You've heard me calling her "Utsunomiya" all day, haven't you? I also told her that until she starts calling me "Hazuki," I'd hold off too. Anyway, that was the part you wanted to know. Everything else really was just us talking about high school stuff."

I said, wrapping up the topic before Miyagi's thoughts could wander further.

If we kept talking, I might end up saying something that didn't seem like a big deal to me, but would to her.

"Hey, Miyagi."

I leaned back against the bed.

"What?"

"You should call me "Hazuki" too."

I knew she'd refuse, but I wanted to try anyway.

"If I called you "Hazuki," Maika would start doing it too, wouldn't she?"

"Well, yeah. She did say that."

Miyagi thought for a moment, then quietly said,

"… Then I'll stick to calling you "Sendai-san.""

Chapter 57

I Want to Feel More of Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 167

Even though my exams were fast approaching, I couldn't focus on studying.

All I could do was sit at my desk and think about Sendai-san, who still hadn't come back from her part-time job.

When I glanced at the clock, it was already long past dinnertime.

I left my room and went into the shared living area.

I wasn't particularly hungry, but I decided to make stew for tonight. I took out a knife and a cutting board, then started peeling carrots, potatoes, and onions.

If this were last year, I would've just settled for a premade meal instead of going out of my way to cook something. But things were different now. Ever since I started living with Sendai-san, I'd grown more comfortable making simple dishes. Besides, it was better to spend my time cooking than overthinking unnecessary things.

Making stew was easy. I just had to chop up the ingredients, fry them, then mix everything together with the roux. I didn't have to worry about seasoning, and it was almost impossible to mess up the taste.

I began cutting the vegetables into bite-sized pieces.

I'd grown used to being by myself, but that didn't make it any less boring. Even on days when Sendai-san came home from work, things weren't any better. She'd always talk about a student I'd never met before, and I couldn't bring myself to be interested in it at all.

She was around most of the time, so when she wasn't, everything felt slightly off. Maybe that was why I was distracted enough to nearly cut my finger while slicing the vegetables.

I stopped cutting the potatoes for a moment.

What if I cut my finger instead of the potato?

What if it bled so much that it wouldn't stop?

— What would Sendai-san do?

I let out a sigh.

There was no way she'd quit her job over a small cut. I knew whatever she was doing and wherever she was had nothing to do with me. Still, ever since Maika came over, I'd been finding myself wanting to interfere in her life more than before.

"I should've just settled for a premade meal today."

I'd started cooking to keep my mind occupied, yet all I could do was overthink things. It was too late to switch to instant food, so I kept chopping the rest of the vegetables and chicken, then tossed them into the pan.

I added water and let it simmer, absently skimming the foam from the surface.

After breaking the roux into pieces and stirring it in, I poured in the milk just as Sendai-san walked through the door.

"I'm home."

Still standing in front of the pot, I greeted her with, "Welcome home," as she came closer, sniffing the air like a dog.

"That's a nice smell you've got there, Miyagi."

"It's not coming from me. It's from the pot."

"Are you making stew?"

Sendai-san stood right beside me.

We were close enough that we could've kissed, and I found myself staring at her face.

Usually, it was Sendai-san who would initiate kisses at times like this. But there was no rule saying I couldn't be the one to start it. If I just leaned in a little, I could close the distance easily.

There wasn't any rule about who should initiate it or when it should happen. So, even without a reason, I could kiss her if I wanted to.

"Miyagi?"

When she called my name, I looked back down at the stew.

If I kissed her without a reason, she'd definitely say something about it. Not that I wanted to kiss her without one anyway. It just felt like the kind of distance where we could kiss—nothing more.

I felt like I'd been acting a bit strange ever since Maika visited us the other day.

"You don't have to stand so close. You can tell I'm making stew from the smell alone, can't you?"

I said, pressing lightly against Sendai-san's stomach.

"I was wondering if you made some for me too."

She took two steps back.

"I wouldn't make stew for just one person."

"I see. Is it almost done?"

"Yeah, it's done."

"Okay, I'll go put this away in my room first."

Sendai-san said, holding up her bag, before heading to her room.

I turned off the stove, took out two plates, and scooped rice onto them before pouring the stew on top. Before long, she came back and carried the plates and spoons to the table.

"Let’s eat."

We said together, and I took a bite of the stew.

Even though we used the same ingredients and roux, it didn’t taste as good as when Sendai-san made it. I knew it didn’t really matter as long as it filled my stomach, but if I was going to eat anyway, I wanted it to taste good.

"You’ve gotten better at cooking, Miyagi. It’s really good."

"… Thanks."

I thanked her out of courtesy.

But Sendai-san was the type to call everything delicious. Even if it wasn’t, she’d probably say it was anyway. And even if I messed it up completely, she’d still eat it all. I didn’t dislike that about her, but sometimes, I just wanted to hear what she really thought.

It wasn’t that I wanted her to always speak her mind, but there were some things I didn’t want her to gloss over.

— Like on the day Maika came over.

I already knew what the two of them talked about, but something still bothered me. That day, when Maika asked if she had someone she liked, Sendai-san never gave an answer. She was the only one who didn’t, and her silence stuck with me.

It wasn’t the kind of topic we usually talked about, so I hadn’t found the chance to bring it up again. It wasn’t something I needed to know, but it still felt unfair that she was the only one who didn’t answer. I’d answered, so she should too.

Still, maybe the reason she didn’t answer was because there really was someone she liked.

"Sendai-san."

I didn’t care who it was. I just didn’t want her to have anything she’d prioritize over me—not even her part-time job.

Still, if there really was someone else she needed, and it wasn't me, there was nothing I could do about it. But if there was a person like that, I at least wanted to know who they were.

"What's up?"

Sendai-san swallowed a mouthful of stew and looked at me.

Talking about crushes was supposed to be simple—something everyone could talk about. I'd done it with Maika, even with Ami. But for some reason, the words caught in my throat like I was about to bring up something impossibly heavy.

"Next time, you make the stew, Sendai-san."

What came out was completely different from what I'd been thinking.

"Sure."

She replied casually.

There wasn't any real reason to ask her now.

Everything just felt off because Maika had brought up something we normally wouldn't talk about.

I let out a small sigh, quiet enough so Sendai-san couldn't hear.

I Want to Feel More of Sendai-san (II)

Part 168

Plates of no-bake cheesecake and glasses of iced tea sat on the table in front of me.

Sendai-san didn't always go out of her way to buy dessert for us, but it seemed she had today.

She sat diagonally in front of me, her back leaning against her bed.

"What's the occasion?"

I asked as I stroked the head of the platypus tissue box that now lived in her room.

Honestly, I would've been fine eating the cake in my room, but somehow, we'd ended up in Sendai-san's instead before I even had the chance to invite her over.

"Just celebrating the end of our exams."

Sendai-san said.

"Let's eat," she added before picking up her fork, crumbling the top of her cake, and taking a bite.

"I'm glad our exams are over too, but is that really something worth celebrating with cake?"

"Even if it isn't, doesn't it make the cake taste better when you think of it as a reward for getting through something tough?"

"… You just wanted an excuse to eat cake, didn't you, Sendai-san?"

"Well, that's part of it. It tastes great, so you should have some too."

Sendai-san smiled as she spoke, and I did as I was told.

"Let's eat," I said, taking a bite of my own cake.

The moist, smooth cream cheese and cookie dough base blended together in my mouth. The no-bake cheesecake came from the same shop Sendai-san had visited once before, and it had a refreshingly tangy flavor.

It hadn't been long since we'd eaten dinner, but it was so good I felt like I could easily eat two or three slices.

"Do you like no-bake cheesecake, Sendai-san?"

There were only two slices of no-bake cheesecake in the box today.

The last time she'd brought cake, there had been four different slices. She'd let me have the no-bake cheesecake and shortcake, while she took the baked cheesecake and strawberry tart that were left.

"Yeah, I do."

"Do you like no-bake cheesecake or baked cheesecake more?"

"I'm fine with either. You like no-bake cheesecake more though, right, Miyagi?"

"I do, but…"

Last time, when I'd asked which cake she liked most, she'd said baked cheesecake and strawberry tart.

But since she bought two no-bake cheesecakes today, I couldn't help but feel she liked them more than she was letting on, though she didn't seem like she wanted to admit it.

"What other kinds of cake do you like besides cheesecake?"

Sendai-san asked back, neatly dodging my question as always.

Even if I asked her the same thing in return, she'd probably just give me another half-hearted answer.

I wanted to know what kind of cake she actually liked most, but I didn't want to keep pressing her.

"Something that isn't too sweet."

I said, swallowing down the unnecessary words that threatened to escape my throat.

"Yeah, it's easy to get sick of something when it's too sweet, huh."

Sendai-san said, gulping down her iced tea.

Everything always felt so complicated with her.

I couldn't even get an answer to something as simple as which cheesecake she liked better.

Even ordinary things—like whether she had a crush on someone, something friends usually talked about—remained unknown to me.

My desire to know more about her swelled like a balloon, but I couldn't bring myself to hand that balloon, filled with all my questions, over to her.

"Oh yeah, Miyagi."

Sendai-san said suddenly, clapping her hands together as if she'd just remembered something.

"What are your plans for summer break? Are you going home?"

"I'm not going home, but I haven't decided what I want to do yet."

Summer vacation was starting in just a few days, and it was going to be even longer than our breaks during high school, yet I had absolutely nothing planned.

"Then how about we do something together? You're not going to hang out with Utsunomiya anyway, right?"

Sendai-san said casually, mentioning Maika's name.

Ever since Maika came over, it felt like the two of them had grown closer. Sometimes, they'd bring up each other's names in passing, as if it were completely natural.

"How do you know that?"

"Utsunomiya told me she was going back to her hometown for summer break. She said she'd be staying there for a while—unless her plans have changed?"

"… No, they haven't. She's not coming back until September."

When Maika had visited the other day, she and Sendai-san got along so well that it wouldn't have been strange if someone told me they'd already been friends for a while. I'd even thought it'd be nice if the three of us could become mutual friends, but I hadn't realized they'd gotten close enough to talk about their summer plans.

"I see. In that case, that means you'll have plenty of free time, right?"

Sendai-san smiled.

It was true—I really was going to have a lot of free time.

I didn't mind the idea of spending time with her during summer break, but I didn't want to say that out loud.

Her knowing Maika's plans so casually left a strange, heavy feeling in my chest—like the lingering sweetness of an overly sugary cake.

I wanted to know how close they were, and what kinds of things they talked about.

As far as I knew, the two of them had never hung out alone before, but would that change in the future?

I wanted to know, but I couldn't bring myself to ask.

It felt wrong to pry that deeply into Sendai-san's social life, and it wasn't something I should be asking in the first place.

I broke off a big piece of cheesecake and took a bite. A refreshing tartness spread through my mouth, but the cream cheese, which should've been light and smooth, felt heavy in my stomach.

"Come on, let's go somewhere together over summer break, okay?"

Maika was my friend, and that wouldn't change even if she grew

closer to Sendai-san, but a part of me didn't want them to.

"I might not have any plans for summer vacation, but I still don't want to go anywhere."

"You really like staying indoors that much?"

"It's too hot out, and it's not like there's any reason to go outside anyway."

That wasn't what I really wanted to say.

Because Sendai-san was getting too close to Maika, everything started to bother me, and it felt like nothing was going right.

The things I wanted to ask kept circling in my head, but I couldn't form them into words.

This was all Sendai-san's fault.

It was because she spoke about Maika so familiarly.

Maika was my best friend—someone special to me—and I didn't want Sendai-san getting close to her. I hated the idea of Sendai-san taking Maika away from me.

… No, that wasn't it.

I'd never cared who Maika spent time with before. But when it came to Sendai-san, everything turned into a mess.

— I…

What I actually hated was the idea of Maika taking Sendai-san away from me.

I didn't want the two of them getting any closer than they already were.

Even if they did and became good friends, that was all it would ever be. Maika would never touch or kiss Sendai-san, and Sendai-san would never touch or kiss Maika.

What I had with Sendai-san was different. I was her roommate—the

only one who lived with her.

I knew that, and yet the moment Sendai-san's attention drifted even slightly toward someone else, unease crept in.

"Well, if that's how you feel, then I'm fine with just watching movies at home with you."

Sendai-san said, her voice breaking my thoughts.

Not wanting to look at her, I glanced down at her plate, but her cheesecake was already gone.

I cut into my own cake and took a few more bites.

Even though I was eating cake, it felt like I was just chewing on dirt.

"Are there any movies you want to watch?"

Sendai-san asked in a soft, gentle voice.

I felt like I was making an unpleasant face—my brows probably furrowed, my eyes full of irritation.

"You can choose, Sendai-san."

I said coldly, taking a sip of iced tea.

It was probably about time for me to head back to my room.

I finished the last of the cake and put my fork down.

But before I could stand, Sendai-san grabbed the hand I'd left resting on the table.

"Was the cake not good, Miyagi?"

What she said and what she did didn't match at all. There was no reason to grab my hand just to ask something like that, and yet she did.

She was always like this—doing things without a reason.

And whether or not there was a reason, her touch felt soft, warm,

and comforting.

Whenever I touched Sendai-san, I felt relieved knowing her attention was on me. It made me forget about Maika.

I wanted to feel more of Sendai-san.

It had to be Sendai-san. No one else would do.

But I didn't want to make her someone "special" to me.

The only thing that was supposed to be special between us was our relationship as roommates.

We were sharing an apartment under the promise of staying together until graduation—a promise we hadn't made with anyone else. But even so, this "special" relationship had an expiration date.

If I let myself make her truly special, I felt like I wouldn't be able to graduate at all.

"I'm going back to my room."

I said.

I tried to pull my hand away, but she wouldn't let go. I glared at her, and she smiled back.

"Why not stay a bit longer? We don't have any more exams, so just relax."

"I want to go back to my room, so let go of me."

"I'll let go if you say you'll stay a bit longer."

Sendai-san was always mean like this—but I didn't want her to be like that today.

If she kept holding my hand, I felt like I'd lose myself.

"I'm not doing that."

I said, trying harder to pull away.

"That’s dangerous, Miyagi. You might knock something over."

She said, but she still didn’t release me.

Her grip even tightened, and I could feel her warmth more clearly. That warmth made me want to touch her even more.

"Sendai-san."

I called her name, but she still wouldn’t let go.

If that was how it was going to be—

I sat up on my knees.

Since she was holding my hand for no reason, there didn’t need to be a reason for what I was about to do either.

I pressed my lips against hers. The moment our warmth met, I felt something softer than her hand. Sendai-san immediately kissed me back firmly. Before long, I pulled away, and she finally let go of my hand.

"You kissed me so I’d let go, right?"

Sendai-san asked without hesitation.

Making a trade with her hadn’t been my intention, but I didn’t bother correcting her. If she wanted to think it was a trade, then so be it.

"No, it wasn’t for that."

I said firmly.

"Then what do you want me to do?"

She asked.

I took a breath, exhaled, and moved to sit beside her.

"You once requested something from me here, didn’t you?"

"I did?"

She said, puzzled.

"You asked me to let you get away with what you did to me, remember?"

I wasn't about to let her pretend she'd forgotten the reason that led to Maika finding out we were roommates. I remembered everything that happened in this room that day—and I doubted I'd ever forget it.

"… Yeah, I remember."

Sendai-san mumbled, which was rare for her.

"I still haven't gotten you back for that."

I couldn't ask her the things I really wanted to know, but I could touch her. That went to show just how much we'd gotten used to touching each other.

"What do you mean by that?"

She asked.

I broke eye contact and sighed. I felt like I couldn't continue with what I wanted to say while looking at her straight in the eye.

"I listened to your request back then, so now I want you to listen to mine."

My desire to know more about Sendai-san had taken a turn I never expected, as if a hidden switch had been flipped inside me. But she was the one who'd connected that circuit by holding my hand, and it was her own fault for not letting go sooner.

"Do you want me to do what I did to you again?"

"No. This time, I'll be the one doing it to you, Sendai-san. I want to see how you'll become when I do—so show me."

If I touched Sendai-san the way she'd touched me—

If I could hear the kinds of sounds she never let anyone else hear—

Then maybe, no matter how close she got to someone else, or how many things she chose over me, I wouldn't feel so uneasy.

I knew I shouldn't touch her while feeling like this, but I couldn't stop myself.

Sendai-san had settled herself deep at the center of me, and my emotions were drawn to her, helpless like leaves carried into the heart of a whirlpool.

"… What brought this on all of a sudden?"

Sendai-san asked, watching me closely.

"Like I said, I just want to see how you'll become. If you don't want it, you can say no. But if you refuse, then I'll never let you do anything like that to me again."

When our eyes met, she was looking at me with a serious expression on her face.

I Want to Feel More of Sendai-san (III)

Part 169

I had no intention of letting her say no.

And most likely, Sendai-san wasn't going to refuse either. But even so, I couldn't help but worry about what would happen if she did. If only she'd give me an answer already—her silence was starting to make me anxious.

"What's your answer, Sendai-san?"

I urged her, who had been quiet this entire time, to finally say something.

"Miyagi, you realize the way you worded that makes it sound like you'll let me do what I did to you again, as long as I don't refuse now, right?"

"… I know."

I knew exactly what I was saying.

And I had no intention of pretending otherwise.

If it meant I could touch Sendai-san today, then I was willing to use my future self as a bargaining chip.

"Okay, then it's fine as long as you know what you're getting into."

Sendai-san said in a soft yet firm voice.

She stared at me without blinking, and I wanted to look away. But if I did, it would feel like what I was about to do to her was unbearably wrong, so I couldn't bring myself to close my eyes or avert my gaze.

"Does that mean you're giving me the okay, then?"

I asked.

"That's exactly what it means."

She replied.

Normally, Sendai-san would've smiled, but today she didn't. Her expression remained serious, and that alone made the air between us heavier. It felt like what we were about to do carried far more meaning than it should have, and I wanted her to act the same as always. For her to look so composed at a time like this felt unfair.

"Alright, then for your part of the deal… bring me two towels."

I said to Sendai-san, who had assumed on her own that I'd kissed her as part of a trade, my voice neither too loud nor too soft.

"Wait, what? Earlier I asked if you'd kissed me just so I'd let go of your hand, and you told me no. So I figured what you wanted was for me to let you do whatever you're planning. Was I wrong?"

"What I plan to do to you is meant to be in return for what I let you do to me before, so it has nothing to do with this trade."

"… Oh, I see. So, what are you planning to use those towels for?"

"Just bring them over."

"You're such a pervert, Miyagi."

Sendai-san spoke in the same tone as always, but her expression was different. Her eyes were fixed on me, unreadable.

"I haven't even done anything yet, or said what I was going to use them for."

Even though this conversation felt like ones we'd had in the past, my voice came out stiff.

"Yeah, but whenever towels were involved, you'd always use them to tie my hands or blindfold me."

"If you already knew what I was going to use them for, why even ask?"

If Sendai-san was going to wear an expression so different from her usual self, then I just had to cover it. If I couldn't see it, I wouldn't have to think about it. And restraining her would probably make me feel even more guilty than I already did, but it was the only way to be sure things went the way I wanted.

"Fine, I'll go grab some."

Sendai-san said reluctantly, standing up. She went to her dresser and came back holding a white towel.

"Here you go."

She placed it over my head before sitting down on the bed. My eyes followed her, and I turned toward her. The towel slipped off my head, but I caught it before it hit the floor. That's when I realized there was only one.

"Where's the other one?"

"You only kissed me once, so you only get one towel. Use it however you want, though."

"You're so mean."

"I think you're the one that's being mean here, Miyagi."

Sendai-san said, poking my side with her foot.

Our positions had been reversed.

Back when I had Sendai-san lick my feet, I was the one sitting on the bed while she sat on the floor. But now, it was the other way around.

I grabbed her ankle.

Her jeans covered her legs, leaving almost nothing exposed. When I looked up, I saw her bare arms showing from her short-sleeved T-shirt.

She wasn't in a school uniform, and she wasn't even wearing a skirt, yet somehow, I felt like what I was looking at now was probably the same sight she'd always seen. I had no intention of licking her foot,

but it left a strange feeling inside me.

"So, what are you going to do with the towel, Miyagi? If you haven't decided yet, how about not using it at all? What do you think of that?"

Her voice came from above, and I answered without hesitation.

"Close your eyes. I'm going to tie it now."

"Out of curiosity, what were you going to tie my wrists for?"

She asked, not closing her eyes.

"So you wouldn't do anything strange while I'm doing things to you."

"Well, I'm not going to do anything, so you don't need to worry about that. Then why do you want to blindfold me?"

"I just don't want you to see me."

I couldn't tell her the real reason—that her expression looked too different from usual—so I gave a different excuse.

"You know, that should be my line. I feel like I'm the one who should be embarrassed about being seen."

"Shut up, Sendai-san."

She'd always been talkative, but today it felt like she was speaking even more than usual. Thinking we'd get nowhere like this, I stood and moved to cover her eyes with the towel. But before it touched her, she grabbed my wrist.

"I'm fine with you blindfolding me, but can I see you smile before you do?"

Her voice was soft, and she smiled at me as if encouraging me to do the same.

"No."

"Then at least kiss me."

She replied instantly, as if she'd already known I would refuse to smile.

I had no reason to deny this request, though.

I leaned in slowly, and Sendai-san closed her eyes. I gazed at her beautiful face for a moment before pressing my lips against hers, softer than the towel in my hand. But before I could take in their warmth, I pulled away and covered her eyes.

"I can't see anything now."

"It'd be a problem if you could."

I gently touched her shoulder, and she lay down on the bed. Sitting beside her, I turned off the lights with the remote and set it down.

"… Face that way, Sendai-san."

"Where?"

"Toward the wall."

Her eyes were covered, and the lights were off. Whether she faced me or not, neither of us could see the other. I knew that, but still, my heart fluttered when she faced me.

"Isn't this a little too much?"

"Who cares? Just turn that way already."

I said, pushing her body toward the wall.

"— You won't be able to kiss me at all if I do. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes."

I answered curtly, and Sendai-san reluctantly turned toward the wall. Seeing how quickly she accepted whatever I told her to do made me feel guilty.

Touching Sendai-san just to soothe my own uneasiness felt like I

was disregarding her feelings entirely. I was always letting my emotions take the lead. She was always so considerate toward me, yet I couldn't even be half as considerate toward her.

I never did anything properly.

I never treated her properly, and even now, I didn't really have a good reason for why I wanted to touch her.

But I didn't think I was wrong.

This was the only way I knew how to be with Sendai-san, and there was nothing wrong with wanting to touch her. Maybe it wasn't how roommates were supposed to act, but that didn't change the fact that we were still roommates. Plus, she was the one who had said it was fine for roommates to do things like this anyway.

So, it should be okay to touch her.

After justifying it, I lay down beside her and wrapped my arms around her from behind. Our bodies pressed together, and I felt her through the thin fabric of her T-shirt. This was probably the first time I had ever hugged her entirely of my own will.

"Miyagi, you're holding me really close."

"So what?"

"Oh, it's nothing… As long as you're okay with it."

Sendai-san's voice was awkward, but then she fell silent.

She was right—we were extremely close. Even through her clothes, her warmth spread into me, and the faint scent of her shampoo reached my nose. My heart pounded so hard I worried she might hear it. But the more of her I touched, the more the unease inside me faded.

I slipped my hand under the hem of her T-shirt. Her body twitched when my palm pressed against her stomach. Resting my forehead against her back, I let my hand drift from her navel to her side.

"Sendai-san."

I called her name out quietly.

"What is it?"

Her soft reply made my heart jolt, and I lifted my forehead from her back as if afraid she'd notice. After a shallow breath, I moved my hand to her back and started tracing downward from her neck. Even when I pressed against the spot behind her heart, I couldn't feel it beating, but her body was hot against my palm.

I pressed my lips to her shoulder through the fabric of her T-shirt, and she shifted slightly.

My hand slid lower over her waist, and my nails dug lightly into her skin. A faint breath escaped her.

I let my hand wander upward again, brushing lightly over her breast through the fabric. The cloth was all I could feel. Since she didn't say anything, I let my fingers trace the shape carefully, brushing over it without pressing down. I could feel the lace and seams of her bra, but it wasn't the warmth or softness I wanted, like when I touched her stomach. I wanted to feel her directly.

I brushed over her collarbone, then trailed my hand to her back, and my fingers found the hook of her bra.

"Can I take it off?"

"Only if I get to do the same to you."

Sendai-san answered quietly.

"I'm not letting you do that. But I really want to take yours off."

I slipped my fingertips under the clasp, grazing her spine. She hadn't said yes, but she hadn't said no either. To push her for an answer, I bit her shoulder through the shirt. Her back stiffened. But still, she said nothing, so I unhooked it anyway.

"You're such a pervert, Miyagi."

She muttered, but I ignored it, sliding my hand forward and under her bra.

Her breast was warm against my palm—softer than I'd imagined, yet firm at the center where a point pressed back into my hand. The small hardness there made it clear how she was reacting, and it stole my breath away.

"Sendai-san."

I whispered her name and pressed harder, but she gave no reply. All I could feel was the hardness beneath my palm. When I brushed my fingers over it, her body jolted in response. Knowing that was her way of reacting to my touch, my breath caught in my throat. My heart was pounding so loudly it echoed in my head, and I almost wanted to cover my ears. But more than anything, I just wanted to keep touching her.

"Sendai-san."

"Y-Yeah?"

Her reply sounded almost normal, but a faint breath slipped into her voice. That single sound sent my heart racing, and I wanted to draw out more of it.

I circled that point with my fingertip, then cupped her breast fully. The softness never changed, but that small hardness kept growing beneath my touch. Slowly, gently, I kept caressing her. With every movement, her back arched toward me. She looked so cute like this.

It made me want more—to take off her clothes, to see her whole body. To turn on the lights and mark her chest, her collarbone, and then touch those marks until I was satisfied.

But when I tried lifting her shirt, she caught my hand and held it tight. Unlike with her bra, this was unmistakably her way of saying no. Last time I'd told her not to take off my shirt either, so I couldn't complain. If I forced it now, she might stop this altogether.

"I won't take your shirt off, so let go."

I said quietly, and she released me.

It would have been a problem if she stopped letting me touch her.

I still hadn't learned everything about her body yet.

I pressed myself closer against her back. My hand stroked her breast again, my fingers brushing the tip, and I kissed her shoulder softly through her shirt.

"How long… do you plan to keep… touching me for?"

Her voice broke at uneven intervals, weaker and more unsteady than earlier. Wanting to hear more of that sound, I cupped her breast.

I had the same thing on my own body, but touching hers felt so good that I didn't want to let go.

"Miya…gi."

She called my name with a firm tone, clutching my wrist. Her back trembled, and her breathing was uneven.

"That's enough, isn't it?"

Her voice was soft as she guided my hand down, resting it just beneath her ribs.

There was no bone there, only softness under my palm.

I caressed the spot for a moment before moving my hand to her side and digging into her skin.

"That hurts."

Sendai-san said in a reproachful tone.

I bit into her shoulder and pressed my hand harder into her side.

Her sweaty skin clung to my palm, and with no space left between us, her warmth seeped into me. Only then did I notice how hot my own body had become.

I moved slightly away from her back and slid my hand below her belly button, until my fingers touched the button of her jeans.

If I undid this, I'd be able to learn more about Sendai-san's body.

The thought of that made me nervous, and the memory of what she'd done to me flashed through my mind, overlapping with the Sendai-san in front of me.

On this bed, I—

The memory struck again, and my focus dropped to my stomach. As my body reacted, I became fully aware of what I was about to do.

A part of her I had never touched.

A place inside Sendai-san I didn't know.

I was about to touch her there.

The past tangled with the present. Caught in that memory, my hands clumsily fumbled with the button of her jeans.

"… Undo this for me, Sendai-san."

"Undo it yourself."

"I can't. I need you to undo it."

I pressed my palm flat against her stomach. She didn't move, even when I pushed a little harder. I rested my forehead on her shoulder and whispered again.

"Do it."

This time, she slipped the button open.

"Is this good?"

Sendai-san asked as I pulled down the zipper.

I slid my hand slowly inside, until my fingers brushed the fabric of her underwear.

It wasn't as though I didn't know what to do next.

But I was still nervous.

Her body had reacted to every touch so far, so I thought I knew

what to expect. But what if I was wrong?

"Miyagi?"

Her quiet voice reached me.

I took a breath and exhaled slowly, then slipped my hand beneath her underwear. My fingers pushed further in, her jeans pressing down against my hand. Before long, I reached a place I'd never touched before, and something slick coated my fingertips.

It wasn't sweat. It was something stickier.

It clung to me more than I'd imagined, leaving me both relieved and stunned.

I never thought Sendai-san would end up like this.

I wasn't sure if I was doing any of it right, but her body reacted to my touch just as mine had to hers. That realization hit me so hard it felt like the blood drained from my body.

I began to move my fingers.

Her back shifted, rising and falling with deep breaths.

The sensation of her reaction clung to my fingertips, as if it wanted to seep into me.

Considering what we were doing, it wasn't strange for her body to respond like this. She had made mine react the same way.

But I still couldn't believe it was my touch that was making her feel like this.

I moved carefully, exploring the slick, unfamiliar place beneath my hand. My fingertips felt hot, and so did her back.

When I pressed myself fully against her, the heat of her body burned through her T-shirt, making my head spin and my breathing uneven. I pressed down harder with my fingers and kissed her ear. A muffled sound slipped from her lips, and wanting to hear it more clearly, I bit her shoulder.

"Ah… nnh…"

Sendai-san let out a rough, strained voice.

It reminded me of her voice when she had a cold, but now far more vivid, and hearing it made my chest tighten.

"… Does this feel good?"

I already knew the answer, but since her voice sounded the same in pleasure as it did in pain, I couldn't stop myself from asking.

"It… feels good…"

Sendai-san's voice was a little higher than usual, carrying a sweetness that reminded me of the cheesecake I'd just eaten.

"How good?"

"Is that… a question… people normally ask…?"

Her words broke off unevenly, but her voice was still loud enough for me to hear.

"I don't know, but just tell me."

As if influenced by her, even my own voice was starting to sound a little different.

"It feels… really good…"

"And how good is that, exactly?"

"It feels… really… really good…"

"Say it in a way I can understand."

Sendai-san let out a sigh. She arched her back as if to pull away, so I drew her closer again.

"Tell me."

I repeated myself, and as though she had given up, she relaxed her back against me and answered quietly.

"It feels better… than when I do it myself…"

"Oh… Wait, huh?"

Her voice was barely audible, just enough to reach my ears, and I nearly missed it. But instead of fading away, the words lodged firmly in my head.

I hadn't expected that kind of answer. It wasn't the one I wanted either, and it only left me confused.

"Sendai-san."

I called her name and hugged her from behind. My head was a jumble, my thoughts refusing to come together.

What was she like when she touched herself? What went through her mind when she did?

And also—did she really do those kinds of things on her own?

Sendai-san stayed silent. Wanting some kind of reaction from her, I moved my fingers, and a thin, unsteady voice I'd never heard from her before escaped her mouth.

"Shut… up… Miyagi…"

Her voice sounded nothing like usual. It was strained, ragged, her words broken by her breath. My own breathing turned uneven, as if trying to match hers.

I felt like I couldn't breathe properly.

In the darkness, only the sounds of our ragged breathing filled the room.

Unable to steady myself, I pressed my fingers harder against the spot beneath them, stroking her. It felt as though my fingertips were drowning in the fluid spilling from her.

It was such a small part of her body, no bigger than a fingertip, yet that alone was enough to change her completely. Maybe anyone could do the same, but I couldn't bear the thought of someone else

changing Sendai-san in this way.

Her body was mine, and mine alone, and I wanted to be the only one who knew this side of her.

"I can't… see anything, so at least… let me hear… your voice."

Sendai-san, who had just told me to shut up moments ago, said as she grabbed my arm.

"My voice?"

"Call me… by my name…"

"Sendai-san."

I answered her quiet request by calling her name. I didn't want to hear my own voice in the state it was now, but even just saying her name felt good.

But Sendai-san seemed unsatisfied.

"No… Call me "Hazuki.""

Calling her by her first name.

If I did that, it would mean—

"No. I'm not calling you that."

I refused, because once I said it, it felt like she wouldn't be mine alone anymore.

"You're… so stingy, Miyagi."

Sendai-san said, then began calling my name again and again.

"Miyagi."

"Mi…yagi."

I'd done the same with her name when she touched me on this bed before. Now it was Sendai-san calling mine, over and over again.

Her voice was as pleasant as ever, and my name kept spilling endlessly from her lips. I was caught up in the sound and it pulled me down, sinking me so deep I wasn't sure I could ever come back.

"Be quiet."

I said, pressing my forehead lightly against her back.

"Why don't you… silence me yourself…?"

Her voice was weak yet defiant, and when I brought my hand to her mouth, she bit down on one of my fingers. It didn't hurt, but the surface of her tongue burned like fire against my skin, as if I'd been scalded. The moment I pulled free, she continued to call my name.

"Miyagi, Miyagi, Miyagi."

Hearing her call my name over and over overwhelmed me. It felt like her voice was breaking me apart even as it filled me. It was sharp, almost painful, yet it felt good.

Drunk on the heat, I kept moving my fingers, stroking her in uneven rhythms—pressing harder one moment, softer the next.

"… Ngh… ahh—"

Her muffled voice slipped into my ears and sank deep inside me.

It brought me back to that Sunday, when her touch had made me feel the same way, and now her body was responding to mine.

I let out a breath.

My fingertips burned, as if they might melt away.

When I paused, her hand gripped my arm tight, clutching so hard it felt like she was begging me to keep going, still calling my name.

I had never seen Sendai-san like this before.

She clung to me as if she truly wanted me.

Her body burned hotter than ever, that heat seeping into me until I felt as though I was being undone from the inside.

I regretted turning off the lights.

I shouldn't have blindfolded her either.

I didn't want her to see my face, but I wanted to see hers. I wanted to know what expression she wore when she called my name. I wanted her to look into my eyes as she said it. The anxiety that had gnawed at me earlier was gone, replaced with something deeper: a desire to know more of her. I wanted to know what she was thinking, what she was feeling each time she called out to me. I wanted to know everything—her past, her future, every part of her I had never seen.

I wanted her to tell me everything, only to me, to no one else.

Even the things I never asked. Even the things I couldn't bring myself to ask.

It didn't have to be today. I just wanted her to tell me someday.

"Sendai-san… Sendai-san."

I buried my face against her neck and whispered her name in a hoarse voice.

"Shi…ori…"

She answered in return, her voice carrying a warmth I had never heard before. It made my heart tingle as if it were burning, and I felt like I couldn't breathe. I stroked her harder and faster than before.

I wanted her to feel good. More than I ever did. Far more than that.

The slick warmth coiled around my fingers, pulling me in. Her hand clamped down on my arm, and I pressed down even more firmly against her. I bit into the side of her neck, sinking my teeth in, and her grip tightened before finally slipping away.

As I continued moving my fingers gently, I heard her call my name through ragged breaths.

"Stop… Miyagi…"

Sendai-san said in a strained voice as she slapped my arm.

"Why?"

"Why? Uh, well, you know…"

Her voice trailed off. She drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly before awkwardly continuing.

"You should know why already. I can't keep going anymore."

Only then did I realize what she meant.

"Oh, sorry."

I pulled my hand from her underwear and turned on the lights. Sendai-san was still curled up, her shoulders rising and falling with each breath.

Her eyes were still covered by the towel, so I couldn't clearly see her expression.

I shifted my gaze to my fingers. They were wet with the fluids that had flowed from her body. When I rubbed them together, the slippery sensation clung to me.

What lingered on my fingertips were the remnants of what Sendai-san had felt—the proof that her words about it feeling good hadn't been a lie. Realizing that the same thing must have stained her fingers on that Sunday made my face burn.

"Miyagi?"

Maybe because I had stayed quiet for too long, Sendai-san called my name. I kept staring at my fingers in silence until she sat up and shifted around. When I finally looked over, she had removed the towel and was staring back at me.

"Wha—Hey, Miyagi. What are you doing?"

Her voice was grumpy but not quite angry. She got up from the bed and, a few moments later, came back with the platypus tissue box.

"Normally, you would've wiped your hands by now. I don't see why

today should be any different."

Muttering under her breath, she grabbed my arm and wiped my fingers off for me. The last remaining traces of her soaked into the tissue, which she tossed in the trash.

"I thought you didn't like getting your hands dirty, Miyagi. Was I wrong?"

She sounded exasperated, but when I looked closer, I noticed her cheeks were flushed. Her clothes were disheveled, and it hit me again what we had just done.

Without answering, I pressed my lips against hers.

I wasn't sure why I suddenly wanted to kiss her—just that, in this moment, I wanted nothing more than to feel her lips on mine.

After a short kiss, I pulled back, but Sendai-san leaned in again. She pressed her lips firmly to mine, her tongue slipping into my mouth. She traced along my teeth before intertwining with my tongue. It was a long, deep kiss, and before long she pushed me down onto the bed.

"I'll make you feel good too, Miyagi."

She whispered just as my back hit the mattress, and I instinctively pushed her away.

My body was still burning. If she touched me now, I felt like I would lose myself completely.

"No."

I refused firmly.

"Why not? I want to touch you too."

She said, sounding dissatisfied.

"Not now."

"Then when?"

"I don’t know, but I just can’t right now, so move."

If I let her touch me now, I knew I’d let her get away with just about anything, so I pushed Sendai-san off and sat up.

"Miyagi."

She called out to me, but I ignored her as I got up from the bed. When she tugged at the hem of my T-shirt, I looked back at her. Our eyes met briefly. Sendai-san averted her gaze—something that was rare for her—before looking at me again.

"You know, Miyagi. I—"

Her words trailed off, and I waited for her to continue. But for some reason, she said nothing more.

Chapter 58

I'm Too Soft on Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 170

Miyagi really was a pervert.

It was strange how she blindfolded me like it was the most natural thing in the world, and how she wouldn't let up until I told her exactly how good it felt. The way she stared so seriously at her fingers afterward was unbelievable too. No matter how I looked at it, Miyagi was a total pervert.

I let out a long sigh as I lay on the bed.

I probably looked a mess with my bra still unhooked and the button of my jeans undone, but since Miyagi had already left and there was no one around to see me, I didn't feel like fixing myself up.

"… I shouldn't have told her anything."

She'd kept asking me how it felt, over and over, until I ended up slipping and saying something I shouldn't have.

There was no reason I had to tell her in detail how good it felt. Sure, it had been way better than doing it alone, but thinking back on it, it was stupid of me to go out of my way to tell Miyagi that, even if I was being put on the spot.

I was curious about what Miyagi thought about it, but I couldn't bring myself to ask. If I wanted to find out, I'd have to bring it up again, and I didn't want to deal with her strange questions. Knowing Miyagi, she'd probably start asking things like what I thought about when I did it alone, or how I did it.

I'd be too embarrassed to answer, and those weren't things I could tell her anyway.

Still, I had this feeling that if she did ask, I'd end up telling her.

I was way too soft on Miyagi, and I was sure she knew it too.

But I was softer on her than she could ever imagine. Even if she hadn't warned me that refusing meant I'd never get to touch her again, I still wouldn't have turned her down. I loved her enough to let her touch me whenever she wanted, even if she hadn't offered herself up. And the fact that she wanted to touch me at all made me incredibly happy.

"Well, that aside…"

I had no idea what had made her say something like that in the first place. I'd always believed that as long as we lived, Miyagi would never be the one to initiate anything, so I couldn't make sense of it. She'd said she wanted to see how I'd become, but there was no way that thought had just come to her out of nowhere.

There had to be a reason. But if I'd tried to push her for an answer then, she definitely would've gone back to her room without touching me at all. And I doubted she'd tell me even if I asked her about it tomorrow.

Even so, I wanted to know what had led Miyagi to do something like that. More than that, I wanted to know what was buried beneath that reason—how she really felt about me.

When Utsunomiya had come over the other day, Miyagi had said she didn't have a crush on anyone. But after what happened today, I couldn't help but wonder if there was more to it.

If something like this had only happened once, I could've written it off as something she accepted on a whim, an impulse, or even curiosity. But this was the second time—and this time, it had been Miyagi who wanted it. It wasn't like before, when I'd gotten caught up in the moment and pushed her down.

This time, Miyagi had initiated it entirely on her own.

If I tried to make sense of it—kept turning over every possible reason—the only conclusion I could reach was that Miyagi might like me too.

But I wasn't naive enough to accept that so easily. I couldn't help but question the answer I'd come to.

I let out a quiet breath.

Rolling onto my side, I pressed my hand against the wall.

I curled my body up and closed my eyes.

The warmth that had been against my back just moments ago—Miyagi's soft touch, the heat of her body that had felt almost feverish, the way her hands had caressed me—everything about it had felt good.

It didn't matter whether she was good at it or not. Just the fact that it was Miyagi touching me had melted away the last of my rationality, until all I could think about was how good it felt.

What she'd done to me made me think that maybe—just maybe—Miyagi liked me too. But now that I was lying alone in bed, that confidence was slipping away fast.

If only she'd smiled at me. If only she'd called me by my first name. Maybe then, I could've believed it a little more.

To begin with, thinking Miyagi liked me was probably just my own delusion—something born from a desire I couldn't control.

"This is bad. If I keep thinking about this, I'll just end up depressed."

Between the part of me that thought Miyagi liked me and the part that thought she didn't, the latter was starting to win. I knew that if I kept thinking about it, it would only take me somewhere painful.

If I was going to think about something, I might as well think about something positive.

I squeezed my eyes shut, blocking out the faint light behind my eyelids.

Earlier, Miyagi had called my name in a voice softer and raspier than usual. The sounds she'd made when I touched her back then had been sensual, but today it felt like she was calling my name because she truly wanted to. It made me wish I had more than two

ears just to hear it.

She hadn't called me "Hazuki," but she hadn't gotten angry when I called her "Shiori," either—or maybe she had; I couldn't quite remember.

Some parts of my memory were vivid, others hazy. But I could clearly remember her biting me. She'd bitten me before when I was the one touching her, but this time, she'd sunk her teeth into my neck hard enough to hurt—and somehow, it had still felt unbearably good.

If I had to keep thinking about something, I wanted it to be the things that made me happy.

But my body, which had finally cooled down, started to warm up again.

When I opened my eyes, the white light filling the room stung.

I slowly sat up on the bed.

I should probably take a bath, I thought to myself.

Part of my body felt especially unclean right now.

But I couldn't bring myself to wash away the traces of Miyagi's touch.

I wanted to feel her again, and to touch her in return.

I wanted to know her more, and for her to know me just as deeply.

If I could, I wanted it to happen right now.

"I know that's not possible, though…"

I leaned my back against the wall.

I didn't know when—or if—something like this would happen again.

I wasn't even sure if Miyagi would still be here tomorrow.

Last time, she'd already been gone by the time I woke up.

"… She’s not going to do it again, is she?"

If anyone should’ve been the one running away in embarrassment, it should’ve been me. But I had no intention of leaving. Even if I felt embarrassed, I still wanted to see her tomorrow.

But what about Miyagi?

There wasn’t any reason for her to run away from home this time, but Miyagi had a habit of doing things unexpectedly. It wouldn’t be strange if she were gone by the time I woke up tomorrow morning.

I didn’t think she’d really disappear on me, but I couldn’t help hoping she wouldn’t.

I wanted to say good morning to her. I wanted to eat breakfast with her.

That was why I decided I’d wake up early tomorrow.

If Miyagi was thinking about running away, I wanted to catch her before she could.

But even with that decision in mind, I couldn’t stop myself from praying—praying that Miyagi would still be here in the morning, just like always.

I'm Too Soft on Miyagi (II)

Part 171

Like I'd planned last night, I woke up earlier than usual today.

To be honest, I barely slept at all.

While suppressing a yawn, I opened the fridge. There was some cheese in front of me, and I remembered there were cherry tomatoes in the vegetable drawer too. I could've gone with the usual butter and jam on toast, but I felt like having something different this morning.

"Maybe I'll try making pizza toast."

I took out two plates and set a slice of bread on each. I was making breakfast for two, since Miyagi was still home today.

It seemed she hadn't run away. Her shoes were still at the entrance, and I could sense her presence on the other side of her bedroom door. I hadn't greeted her with a good morning yet, but if I waited a little longer, I'd be able to.

"— Good morning."

Not that I was practicing or anything, but I murmured it to myself anyway. Then, I spread tomato sauce on the bread and topped them with cheese, sliced cherry tomatoes, and ham. I put the slices in the toaster oven and, while waiting, shredded some cabbage and sliced cucumbers for salad. As I arranged the cabbage, cucumbers, and leftover tomatoes in deep plates, the toaster beeped to say it was ready.

Breakfast was nearly done, but Miyagi still hadn't come out of her room.

As I debated whether to knock on her door, I took the slices of bread with melted cheese out of the toaster and placed them on the plates. I would've liked to add basil, but since we didn't have any, I poured a little olive oil over the pizza toast and finished them off with a

sprinkle of pepper instead.

I glanced over at Miyagi's door. It still hadn't opened.

Carrying the plates with salad and pizza toast to the dining table, I grabbed some orange juice from the fridge. I poured the tangerine-colored liquid into two glasses and sighed.

Meals weren't meant to be eaten alone.

I wanted to eat this breakfast with Miyagi.

So, I walked over to her door.

I took a few deep breaths, opened and closed my hand, then clenched it into a fist. Even though it wasn't the first time I'd ever knocked on her door, I couldn't help feeling nervous.

I knocked lightly with my fist.

No answer.

This time, I knocked louder—twice in a row—and finally, a voice came from the other side.

"What is it?"

"Miyagi, breakfast is ready."

I said, consciously making an effort to sound like how I usually did.

About ten or fifteen seconds passed—maybe longer—before Miyagi finally came out. She kept her head down, so our eyes didn't meet. Even as she walked past me, she wouldn't look up, but I greeted her with a good morning anyway.

"… Good morning."

Her quiet reply came just as her door was shut behind her.

Miyagi still kept her head down, avoiding my eyes. I wouldn't say things were that awkward, but the way she refused to look up made it clear she felt that way.

"Look at me."

I called out to her.

"Does it really matter if I look at you or not?"

"Just look at me."

"Why?"

"That should be my line. Why are you not looking at me?"

I asked, not really expecting her to answer.

I could more or less guess why Miyagi wouldn't look at me, and it didn't really matter.

Whatever the reason, the fact that she wouldn't meet my eyes made something deep in my chest ache. And if there wasn't any reason at all, it only hurt worse. Either way, it was a dull, throbbing pain—like a wound that refused to heal—and the thought of it lingering forever filled me with a heavy gloom.

"I don't know."

Miyagi mumbled, still not looking up.

We'd already exchanged good mornings, and we were about to eat breakfast together.

Everything I'd prayed for yesterday had come true.

Yet, somehow, it didn't feel like enough.

"Miyagi."

I softly called her name, reaching out to her.

I tucked her hair behind her ear and touched the plumeria earring I'd chosen for her. Feeling the small flower beneath my thumb, I whispered her name again and kissed the earring. As I did, she grabbed the hem of my T-shirt.

I pulled away and met her eyes at last.

Then I kissed her cheek and said, “Good morning,” once more. This time, her reply came clearly.

"Good morning."

But as soon as she spoke, she looked down again.

"Did you have a dream today?"

I asked Miyagi, who wouldn’t meet my eyes anymore.

"No, I didn’t."

"Well, I did. I dreamt that you were hugging me."

I told her the details of a dream I hadn’t actually had. Miyagi lifted her head slightly.

"That has to be a lie."

"Yeah, that was a lie. I didn’t actually dream about anything."

To be exact, I’d managed to doze off a bit, but not enough to dream.

"You lie so easily, Sendai-san."

Miyagi said, sounding displeased, and began to turn away again—so before she could, I caught her lips with mine.

I pressed hard enough to feel the distinct shape of her lips beneath the softness, then pulled back. Before she could take another breath, I kissed her again, biting lightly at her lower lip, soft and springy like a gummy candy.

I wanted to push Miyagi down right then and there.

Even though we weren’t on a bed, I wanted to feel every part of her, to kiss her anywhere I could reach.

I knew that wasn’t possible—but still, I wanted to.

I bit her soft lips, then licked them.

I pressed harder, until breathing became difficult, and wrapped my arms around her waist. As I pulled her closer, Miyagi pushed me away.

"Why'd you kiss me?"

She asked flatly, putting distance between us.

"Because I wanted to."

"That's it?"

"Yep."

She looked at me, clearly unhappy, so I added,

"Well, if you want a reason, I can make one up."

"Make one up?"

"I just thought you were cute. How's that for a reason?"

I said as I smiled at her, and she kicked me in the leg—hard.

"Hey, don't kick me so hard."

I was glad I hadn't told her I loved her yesterday.

If I had, I wasn't sure she'd still be here this morning.

And even if she were, things would've been unbearably awkward. I wouldn't have been able to kiss her or smile at her like this.

"It's your fault for saying weird things, Sendai-san."

"Thinking you're cute isn't weird, though."

"Fine, then it's your fault for saying things you don't mean."

"But I do think you're cute, Miyagi."

I said, reaching out to run my fingers through her hair, but she kicked me again. Fearing I'd end up covered in bruises if I kept calling her cute, I caught her hand and led her to the dining table.

"I made pizza toast today, so let's eat before it gets cold."

Miyagi sat in her usual seat, and I took mine. We both said, "Let's eat," in unison before taking a bite.

"It's cold now because you kept doing weird things."

"All I did was kiss you, though."

I said before I took a sip of my orange juice and another bite of pizza toast. Like she'd said, it wasn't warm anymore, but maybe because it was my first time making it, I still thought it tasted pretty good.

After swallowing another bite, Miyagi spoke in a small, hesitant voice.

"Why do you seem so normal right now, Sendai-san?"

"Normal?"

"… You're not embarrassed?"

Her words were vague, but I could tell she was referring to what had happened yesterday.

"Miyagi, did you run away from home that time because you were embarrassed?"

"I'm the one who asked you a question first."

She said in a low, quiet voice, so I answered honestly.

"I am embarrassed, but it's not like I have anywhere else to go."

She'd touched me, made me let out sounds I'd never made before, and pushed me to answer questions I shouldn't have had to. Miyagi's voice had sounded different when I'd touched her too, but looking at it all now, I was definitely the one who should've felt more embarrassed between the two of us. Considering what had happened to me yesterday, I could understand why she'd wanted to run away that day.

But despite all that, I wanted to be with her—even if it was embarrassing.

"You have friends who'd let you stay over, don't you?"

"I do, but I feel more comfortable here. Would it have been better if I wasn't around?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then at least try to look a little happier."

I wasn't saying she had to smile or act cheerful, but I wished she'd at least lose that obvious scowl.

"It doesn't matter what kind of face I make."

"It doesn't, but I bet breakfast would taste better if you looked a little happier."

I took a bite of my pizza toast as I stared at her sullen expression.

Miyagi didn't look cheerful—in fact, she lowered her gaze even more.

I opened my mouth to complain about how uncooperative she was being, but before I could speak, I heard her quiet voice from across the table.

"… I think it's better to eat with someone than to eat alone."

"Huh?"

"That's my answer. You asked if it would've been better if you weren't here, right?"

After saying that, Miyagi took a sip of orange juice.

"Oh, right. I did ask that."

Her sudden honesty unsettled me a little, but it also felt like a chance to finally get the answer I'd been hoping for yesterday, so I decided to ask the same question again.

"Hey, Miyagi. How about we go somewhere together over summer break?"

Miyagi looked up at me from across the table.

After a short pause, she replied quietly,

"As long as you decide where we go."

"Okay."

I said, and Miyagi took a bite of her now-cold pizza toast.

I'm Too Soft on Miyagi (III)

Part 172

It had been a week since summer break began.

We'd promised to go somewhere together, but I still hadn't decided where. It wasn't that we were short on options—just that I couldn't find a place that felt right.

"Miyagi."

From where I was sprawled on the bed, I tugged on Miyagi's hair as she sat on the floor reading a manga. Our bodies were just barely touching, and yet it felt like my heart was beating a little faster than normal.

"What's your problem, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi, who had been sitting with her back against the bed, swatted my hand away without turning around.

I could understand how she felt.

Even I would've said something if someone had tugged on my hair three times within ten minutes.

"I'm just bored."

I couldn't exactly tell her I wanted her to look at me instead of her manga, and I knew there was no way I could be more interesting than whatever she was reading anyway.

It wasn't that I didn't want to be Miyagi's number one. But right now, it was better to keep things the way they were and let her come to my room even when she had no real reason to.

The first time we'd done something that normal roommates wouldn't do in this room, Miyagi had disappeared afterward. But this time, she hadn't. She still came over like before and spent time here with me, and I felt like that was something I needed to cherish.

"Here, why don't you read this?"

Miyagi picked up one of the manga volumes stacked on the floor and set it on the bed.

"I read that one already."

"Then read it again."

"I'm tired of reading manga. Let's go out somewhere."

"Have you decided where we should go?"

Miyagi finally closed the manga she'd been reading and turned to look at me.

"I want to go on a trip to the hot springs."

"… Right now?"

"Right now."

"I think it's a little late to be going to a hot spring now."

"Not if we stay the night, right?"

It was still too early to call it evening, but enough time had passed since lunch that we couldn't make it a day trip anymore. Considering how long the travel would take, we'd have to stay somewhere overnight.

"… When you said you wanted us to go somewhere together, I thought you meant a day trip."

"And what if I didn't?"

"You didn't even book a place to stay, did you?"

"We should be able to stay somewhere even without a reservation."

"You really are carefree, huh, Sendai-san. Even if there were rooms available, there's no way I'd go. If I'd known that's what you meant, I wouldn't have agreed in the first place."

"I figured you'd say that."

I already knew what her answer would be before I asked, but there was no harm in asking anyway. Maybe, just maybe, she'd say yes—and there was nothing wrong with testing whether that faint hope could turn into reality.

— But today, that hope had been dashed.

"Sendai-san, be serious and think of somewhere we can actually go."

Miyagi's said, sounding displeased.

"I am thinking about it seriously, you know."

The destination didn't have to be a hot spring, and it wasn't like it had to be some kind of trip either.

"So, what kind of places have you thought of?"

"Hmm… I'm still deciding. I'll tell you once I've made up my mind."

There were plenty of places I wanted to go with her, but nowhere that felt like the place. All I wanted was to take Miyagi somewhere she'd actually enjoy—but figuring out what that might be turned out to be harder than I thought.

We'd already gone to the movies once before, so that didn't feel new anymore.

If it were with my friends from university, deciding would've been easy—we'd just go shopping or something—but Miyagi and I didn't enjoy the same things. I could try going along with what she liked, but if I suggested somewhere that only suited her, she'd probably turn me down. I'd even considered a museum or an art gallery, but inviting her to something like that—when it wasn't really a mutual interest—seemed too much like a date, and I couldn't bring myself to suggest it.

Normally, I didn't have this much trouble deciding where to go. But when it came to Miyagi, I just couldn't decide.

"Then maybe we just shouldn't go anywhere at all."

Miyagi said nonchalantly, then opened her manga again.

Before her eyes could drop back to the page, I gave her hair a gentle tug to draw her gaze toward me once more.

Just like last summer, Miyagi was by my side.

Only this time, our relationship had progressed a little further.

If someone told me I should be satisfied with just that, I probably could be. But since we'd already promised to go out somewhere together, it felt like a waste to simply accept what she said about not needing to go anywhere anymore.

"Summer break just started. There's no need to rush. Just give me a little more time."

Unlike back in high school, our summer break now stretched into September, so there was no reason to hurry. It was longer this year, and that meant we could spend even more time together.

"You've got your part-time job, so you don't have to force yourself to go anywhere with me. Just focus on work."

Miyagi sounded mildly annoyed as she pressed her hand against my stomach while I lay on the bed.

"I work the same days as usual, so I'm pretty free most of the time."

It was true that I still had my tutoring job during the break, but I hadn't taken on any extra shifts—and I didn't plan to. I'd thought about picking up another job, but I'd decided it didn't have to be this summer. If I was going to add anything to my schedule, it'd be more time with Miyagi, not more work.

"If you're that free, you should get another job. As for me, I'm just going to stay home. It's too hot to go anywhere."

My thoughts didn't seem to reach her at all. She pressed down on my stomach again, like she was handling an oversized stuffed animal.

Just as she said, the world beyond the lace curtains looked

unbearably hot compared to this air-conditioned room—a reminder that it really was midsummer. I couldn't blame her for wanting to stay inside, but I still didn't want to accept it.

"Well, for now, I don't plan on taking more work. Anyway, is there anywhere you want to go, Miyagi?"

I asked, even though I knew she probably wouldn't give me any ideas.

"I thought we agreed that you'd be the one deciding, Sendai-san."

Miyagi said quietly, then began to stroke my stomach.

The way she touched me wasn't much different from when she'd been pressing on it earlier. The way her hand moved over my clothes made me feel no different from the platypus tissue box sitting beside her.

It was better than being bitten or kicked, and it made me happy that she was taking interest in some part of my body, but I couldn't help feeling a little annoyed by the way she touched me, as if forgetting I was a living person and not a stuffed animal.

"Miyagi."

I called her name, and her hand stopped moving. I got off the bed and sat down beside her, reaching out to touch her hair. Then, I gave her earring a quick kiss before pulling away.

"Did you really need to kiss that just now?"

She asked, sounding displeased.

"I did. We promised I'd decide where to go, so I was just making a vow not to break it."

"That's not the kind of promise you need to swear on my earrings for."

"It's more reassuring if I do though, right?"

I smiled at her, and she started to say something, but I could tell it would only be another complaint. I brushed my fingers over her lips

to silence her. She looked at me with her lips slightly parted. When I leaned closer, she furrowed her brows for a moment before quietly closing her eyes. Taking that as her way of saying it was okay, I pressed my lips against hers.

When I pressed harder against her lips and slipped my tongue inside, she accepted me quietly. Our tongues met and blended together with ease.

Miyagi was more lenient in the summer.

She'd been that way last year too—letting me touch her.

If it was the season that made her like this, then I wished summer would never end.

I pulled away, then kissed her again, deeper this time. Her mouth was warm, soft, and pleasant against mine, and when I grabbed her arm, wanting to touch her more, her skin felt cool, as if the room was too cold for her. I savored her warmth and chill all at once before pulling back.

"You're kissing me way too much."

Miyagi muttered, pulling away slightly.

"If you let me kiss you more, then we don't have to go anywhere."

I didn't want to ruin the promise I'd just made, but if she accepted that condition, I could live without it. After all, we'd spent most of last summer inside too—and staying indoors wasn't all that bad.

"More in what way?"

I touched Miyagi's cheek and let my fingers trail down her neck.

"“More” as in, you'll let me kiss you not just today, but all throughout summer break—and in all kinds of places, too."

My hand followed the collar of her T-shirt, brushing over her collarbone. When I leaned toward her neck, she pushed my shoulder away.

"You promised you would decide where we're going, so make sure

you keep it."

Miyagi said, glaring at me.

Apparently, she had chosen going out together over kissing.

"You're so stingy, Miyagi."

"No, I'm not."

"You totally are."

"… I'm okay with it as long as it's not too much."

Her voice was so quiet, I would've missed it if I hadn't been listening closely.

"Wait, what did you just say?"

I'd heard the words and understood them, but I couldn't stop myself from asking again.

"Miyagi."

Even when I called her name, she stayed silent. So, to make sure I hadn't misheard her, I pressed my lips to hers.

She didn't reject the kiss.

But when I tried to move from her lips to her neck, she put her hands on my shoulders and stopped me.

"That's enough for today."

So it seemed Miyagi really was more forgiving during the summer.

And that side of her felt unfair.

When she allowed me to get away with this much, it was hard not to believe that maybe she had feelings for me too.

In my mind, I weighed the Miyagi who let me kiss her—as long as it wasn't too much—against the uncertain future that might come if I ever tried to learn how she truly felt about me.

It didn’t take much thought to figure out which was more appealing. The Miyagi who would quietly tell me it was okay to kiss her was far more alluring, and I didn’t want to risk losing that by trying to find out what she really felt.

As I stayed silent, Miyagi opened her manga again.

Only the soft sound of turning pages filled the room.

Remembering how cold her arm had been, I reached for the remote and raised the air conditioner’s temperature by one degree.

Volume 6 Extra

The Morning After We Crossed the Line as Roommates (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 172-extra

Night was supposed to be for sleeping, but I hardly got any rest.

The cause of my sleeplessness was the person in the room next to mine. I didn't want to face Sendai-san, yet morning came all the same, and with it, the inevitability of seeing her.

What I'd done with Sendai-san yesterday was something roommates didn't do with each other. That hadn't changed just because morning arrived. I was still the person who'd done something with Sendai-san that roommates didn't do.

What should I do?

I still wasn't sure what kind of expression I should have on my face when I say "good morning" to her.

Lying on top of my bed, I curled up and wrapped myself in my comforter.

The black cat plush I'd brought from my previous place sat beside my pillow, but right now, I couldn't bring myself to kiss its forehead like I had yesterday. If I did, it would only make me think of Sendai-san—the one who had given me the cat in the first place—and if I talked to the plush, I could imagine it responding with her voice.

I didn't want that.

I didn't want to think about her at all.

But she was just beyond the wall, and soon she'd come out of her room. On a normal morning, we'd eat breakfast together and talk. But if we did that today, there was no way I could avoid seeing her,

and it would be impossible not to think about Sendai-san.

I clutched the comforter tightly and squeezed my eyes shut.

If I could, I wanted to melt right into the sheets.

I wanted to disappear until I could face Sendai-san again with a perfectly normal expression.

But that was even more impossible than avoiding her altogether, and I let out a small sigh.

There had been mornings before when I cursed the sun for coming up—when I had classes I hated or events I didn't want to attend—but never as much as today. This time, I truly resented the sunlight, and my mood was all the way in the gutter.

That was how much the events of yesterday had affected me.

After a sigh big enough to leave me lightheaded, I sat up and looked at my phone. It was a little past four. It wouldn't be long before Sendai-san woke up.

She rarely ever overslept.

Even if I holed up in here, she'd knock once it was time to head to school. And if I still refused to come out, she might try to enter my room. I could lock the door, but interior locks like this were easy to open from the outside. Which meant that, sooner or later, we'd have to face each other.

After thinking it through, I knew there was only one thing to do.

I had to leave before Sendai-san woke up.

That way, I wouldn't have to run into her at all.

I got up and stepped quietly into the shared living space.

Without thinking, I turned on the light, though I immediately regretted it.

She might wake up. If she saw me, she'd definitely ask what I was doing awake at this hour, and then we'd end up talking.

I moved as quietly as I could to the washroom, brushed my teeth, washed my face, and went back to my room.

After getting changed, I peered into my closet.

I hesitated for a moment, wondering what to do next.

A terrible thought crossed my mind—one that would only make Sendai-san worry about me and cause trouble for Maika.

I clenched my hands into fists before letting them go.

I took a deep breath in, then exhaled.

After fidgeting with my bangs a little, I pulled out a large bag I'd tucked away at the back of my closet.

"… I wonder if Maika will be okay with this."

I was preparing to pack my bag so I could stay over at her place.

I should have contacted Maika to ask for her permission first, but it was still too early in the morning for that. So I decided I'd ask her after meeting her at school, and started packing my bag.

I'd gotten used to being near Sendai-san, but right now, that same closeness felt suffocating.

Having my roommate see a side of me no one else had ever seen, and hear sounds from me no one else had ever heard—those were things I needed both time and distance to come to terms with.

I picked up the black cat plush that had been sitting on my bed and placed it on the bookshelf.

Meeting its gaze, I gently pet its head.

"I'll be back soon."

I said to the black cat, who didn't reply, then quietly picked up my packed bag and left my room.

This time, I didn't turn on the lights in the shared living space.

I walked through the hallway in the dark, careful not to make any noise with my footsteps. Then, I turned around for a moment.

"I’m going to be staying over at Maika’s for a while."

I announced softly in the direction of the shared living space, then put on my shoes by the front door.

I had a few ways to pass the time before classes started.

"… I’ll be off, then."

I said, my voice quieter than before, and opened the front door.

Volume 6 Extra

The Morning After We Crossed the Line as Roommates (I)

(Sendai PoV)

Part 172-extra

Miyagi hadn't come out of her room yet.

When I woke up and went to the shared living space, there was no sign of her. Even after I started making breakfast, she still didn't come out.

And now, even when I knocked, there was no answer.

Still, after what had happened yesterday, I couldn't really be surprised.

I hadn't expected Miyagi to be someone who could face me so easily after doing something that wasn't appropriate for roommates, so in a way, this felt only natural.

I stopped myself from knocking again.

There was supposed to be a proper order to things like this, and I'd clearly skipped a few steps yesterday. So this outcome felt almost inevitable.

No matter how I looked at it, I was the one at fault.

Still, I couldn't help thinking it was Miyagi who had started it.

When she'd told me to lick her foot, something in me came undone —the screw that held my sense of reason in place slipped loose. My rationality had always been unreliable around her, and she'd only made it worse with the things she'd said□

No, that wasn't right.

It wasn't about assigning blame. We hadn't done anything wrong. We'd just done something a little unfitting for people who called themselves roommates.

So, awkward as it might be, the best thing to do was try and go back to our usual lives together.

Even I didn't know what kind of face I should make when I saw Miyagi, yet I was still standing here in front of her door. But I also understood she needed time.

I decided to eat the breakfast I'd made by myself and sat down.

Looking at the empty space in front of me, I let out a sigh.

With Miyagi, who would usually sit across from me, gone, my field of vision felt unusually wide. Even if things were awkward, I still wanted to eat with her. But after what had happened yesterday, forcing her out of her room didn't seem right. She'd come out when she was ready—I just had to wait.

"Let's eat," I said quietly under my breath, and then bit into my toast spread with jam and butter.

It would be an exaggeration to say it tasted bad, but it was definitely bland.

I never measured how much jam or butter I used, so the amount varied each time. But today, the toast tasted nothing like it usually did. The jam wasn't sweet, and the butter wasn't salty. Even the ham and eggs felt dull on my tongue. Eating itself felt like a pointless waste of time.

I ate both pieces of toast I'd made, moving my hands and mouth mechanically as I forced it all down. I stored the leftovers in the fridge and washed the dishes. I was still worried about Miyagi, but skipping classes wasn't really an option, so I went back to my room to get ready.

A reasonable amount of time passed after breakfast, and I went back out to the shared living space.

As expected, Miyagi still wasn't there.

At this rate, I felt like I'd never see her face again, so I found myself standing in front of her door once more.

I drew in a breath, let it out, and knocked three times.

There was no response.

So I called out her name.

"Miyagi. Hey, Miyagi," I said, repeating her name over and over.

But she still didn't come out.

I'd known from the very start.

Her room was probably empty.

I finally faced the truth I'd been avoiding.

She must have left before I even woke up.

I didn't want to accept the truth, but I went to check the front door anyway—the place I'd been avoiding all morning.

 Her shoes were gone.

I'd expected it, but still, I let out a long, weary sigh.

"I knew it."

Rubbing at my temples, I went back to the shared living space and sat down.

Why hadn't I woken up earlier?

If I had, I could've caught her before she left. We could've had breakfast together. She probably hadn't wanted to see me, but once we did, she would've realized it wasn't actually that big of a deal.

I was filled with regret.

I wanted to see her—right now.

I wanted to know what kind of expression she'd had this morning,

what she'd been thinking when she left the apartment.

Had she thought of me, even a little?

Had she remembered what happened yesterday?

They were probably trivial things to her, but to me, they were important.

Though, I knew Miyagi wouldn't tell me even if I asked.

I sighed and went back to my room.

I picked up my phone from the table and sent Miyagi a message:

『Good morning. Did you leave already?』

Ten minutes went by, and of course, no reply came.

I lay down on the bed.

My blouse and skirt would probably wrinkle, but I didn't care. I didn't have the energy to.

Lying here in this apartment without Miyagi made last night—when she'd been right beside me on this bed—feel like a lie. But it wasn't, and that was exactly why she wasn't here right now.

I pressed my palm against the spot where her head had been.

I stroked it gently, then gripped the sheets tight.

Her warmth and the feel of her skin were gone.

All that was left under my palm was cool, smooth fabric.

If only I'd held her tighter and not let her go back to her own room…

Even though Miyagi and I were just roommates, I couldn't help thinking things like that.

I tensed my body and curled up.

Then, in one quick motion, I sat up and stretched.

I decided to send Miyagi another message.

『What time are you coming back today?』

I waited for a while, but there was no reply.

It was almost time to leave for school, or I'd be late for class.

I tossed my phone into my bag and stepped out of my room.

Even if I couldn't see her now, I'd surely see her tonight.

What had happened yesterday had been a big thing for both of us, but it wasn't reason enough for her not to come home.

On my way out, I stopped in front of her door.

"At least reply to my messages."

I muttered quietly as I left the shared living area.

Volume 7 SS

Utsunomiya Maika's Summer Vacation (I)

(Maika PoV)

Part 172-extra

"Yeah, I know. I'll definitely come back."

As I repeat the answer I've already given twice during the ten-minute conversation with my mom, she reminds me once again of the tasks I need to complete before heading home.

Clean out the refrigerator, take out the trash, and turn off the main gas valve.

I don't want to come back to expired food waiting in the fridge, nor trash piling up. A gas leak while I'm away is out of the question.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of everything before I head back."

With that, she added, "Make sure to lock up properly," and "Don't forget, Maika," before hanging up the phone.

I'm going back to my family home for summer break.

It's a typical way for a college student living far from family to spend a long holiday. While I want to see my parents, the thought of losing the sense of freedom from living alone is hard to let go.

"I'm happy to see them after so long, but..."

Part of me wants to spend the summer vacation right here. Shiori mentioned she wasn't going back home, which makes me a bit envious.

—Ami was hoping to see her though.

I type out 'Are you really not going back for summer break?' on my smartphone and send it to Shiori.

'I'm not planning to go back.'

The reply comes in less than five minutes, the same response I heard at school, but I decided to call her anyway.

It's still too early to sleep.

Shiori should pick up the phone, and after hearing the ring thrice, her familiar voice comes through.

"Maika, what's up?"
"Nothing much, just felt like talking. Ami said she'd be happy if you came back, even for a bit. Aren't you going back for Obon either?"

Though I expected her to say no, I asked just in case.

"I told Ami too, but Obon is crowded, and it's a hassle to go back and forth."

Shiori gives the expected answer and adds, "I'm not really fond of big crowds."

"Neither am I. But summer break is long, why not go back when it's less crowded?"
"Well, it is long, but it's easier to just laze around here, so I'm not planning on going back this time. You're going back for quite a while, right, Maika?"
"I'm planning to relax, but won't you be bored if you don't go back, Shiori?"
"I've got things to do."
"Like what?"
"Studying, for example."
"You don't seem like the type, Shiori."

When I said that, Shiori replied with an unusually serious tone, "I'm a college student now, it's different from high school."
I wanted to persuade her for Ami's sake, but it seemed impossible. Shiori's resolve not to go back seemed quite firm.

"More importantly, are you ready for your trip, Maika? Don't forget to lock up when you leave."

Her words made me sigh dramatically.

"My mom just told me the same thing."
"Did she? And don't forget to take the trash out before you leave."

I heard the same words I had heard earlier again and laughed, saying, "I was told that too."

Utsunomiya Maika's Summer Vacation (II)

Part 172-extra

"Oh look, a traitor."

Right in front of the usual store in the usual shopping mall, Ami pointed at my face as she arrived exactly on time for our meeting. In an exaggerated tone, she added, "Servant of evil!"

"Eh? That's so harsh."
"It's not harsh. Maika, you're a traitor who escaped from the ninja village with Shiori and defected to the evil organization, 'To-Kai.'"
"There are so many things wrong with that. For starters, this isn't a 'ninja village.' I don't remember learning any ninja skills."
"I don't remember becoming a ninja either. Welcome back, Maika."
"Thanks. I thought Ami might have been brainwashed by the evil organization."
"This isn't the city, so there's no brainwashing. You're safe."

Ami laughed out loud at that.

And then, with a heartfelt expression, she said, "It's only been a short while since graduation, but it feels like it's been so long since I've seen you, Maika."
"Yeah, it really feels like a lot of time has passed."
"Maika, have you gotten a bit more stylish?"
"Maybe I've blended into the 'To-Kai' evil organization."
"So, 'To-Kai' really is an evil organization, huh? I bet they have stylish evil ninjas."

Ami jumped into the nonsensical conversation without missing a beat, and time seemed to rewind back to our high school days.

"Ami. Don't ninjas seem a bit far from being stylish?"
"Well, let's just leave that be. So, has Shiori gotten stylish since joining the evil organization 'To-Kai'? She's sharing a room with Sendai-san, right?"
"'To-Kai' is quite an impressive organization, you know. Shiori..."
"Shiori became stylish too?"
"She's gotten earrings and stuff, but she hasn't changed a whole lot."

"Oh, earrings! When I heard she got her ears pierced, I was surprised. I never thought Shiori would do it."

This is truly enjoyable.

University life is fun too, but nothing can beat the time spent chatting about silly things back in my hometown. Spending time like this makes me feel it was worth coming back, even if it meant losing the sense of freedom from living alone.

"Ami. Shiori has become really close with Sendai-san, you'd be shocked to see them together."

The room-sharing between Shiori and Sendai-san is something Shiori told Ami, so it's no longer a secret.

Yet, Ami still finds it hard to believe.

I've been asked about Shiori and Sendai's room-sharing by Ami many times now.

"Rather than shock, I just can't wrap my head around the fact that Shiori and Sendai-san are living together. What's their dynamic like?"

I wish Shiori had come back too.
It would have been so much more fun if the three of us could talk about silly things like we did in high school.

However, Shiori hasn't returned.
So, I end up answering for her.

"Well, let's see."

Where should I start?

I continued speaking, remembering the time I visited Shiori's house.

Chapter 59

The Things I Want To Do With Sendai-san Without Needing A Reason (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 173

Sendai-san had been in my line of sight all day.

It wasn't that strange, considering we lived together, but ever since summer vacation started, we'd been spending more time at home together. We'd stayed in a lot during Golden Week too, but now, it felt like even more than before.

Anyway, the point was—Sendai-san was always around.

We were supposed to be playing video games, but she'd put her controller aside and wrapped her arm around my shoulder. Having her body against mine made me feel strangely at ease, and I didn't want her to let go.

"Aren't you planning to hang out with any of your friends, Sendai-san?"

I hadn't expected her to be home all the time like this. I thought she'd go out with friends or spend her days working, but since summer vacation began, she'd spent nearly all her time outside of work at home.

"Nope. What about you, Miyagi?"

"I told you before, I don't have any plans."

"Yeah, me neither. The only thing I have planned is spending time with you."

Sendai-san leaned against me as she spoke. Whether she was joking or not, I couldn't tell. Our shoulders and arms, which were already touching, pressed even closer together, and the places where we

touched started to feel warm.

"Aren't you hot, Sendai-san?"

Her room was usually kept cool.

More accurately, her air conditioner was always on high. Normally, it felt cold to me, but these past few days, the temperature seemed a little warmer than usual.

"I dressed lightly today, so I'm fine."

She said, stretching out her pale legs.

Well, I guess that's true, I thought to myself.

Unlike me, Sendai-san was wearing shorts. Just looking at her made me feel cold. When I reached out and touched her thigh, she flinched slightly.

"Are you cold, Miyagi?"

Before, I would've complained about how cold it was or turned up the temperature without asking. But this was Sendai-san's room, not mine. I should respect her wishes. As long as it wasn't cold enough to make me sick, I had nothing to complain about.

Besides, I'd rather have the air conditioner blowing cold air than warm. If the room were a bit cooler, Sendai-san would cling to me—and with her sticking to me like that, even a chilly room would feel just right.

Or so I thought. But apparently, the warmth didn't bother her at all. Despite being sensitive to heat, she stayed close to me without hesitation.

"It's your room, Sendai-san. You should adjust the temperature however you like."

I said as I slid my hand down her thigh.

I couldn't tell whether it was my palm or her leg that felt warm.

"Well, in that case, I'm fine with this."

She said softly, then took hold of my hand resting on her thigh. I could feel her heat clearly as she joined our hands together.

"Do you want to keep playing?"

I asked, glancing at the controller still lying on the floor.

"I can’t win against you, so I give up."

"Then let’s do something else."

"Like what?"

"You decide, Sendai-san."

I tried to free my hand, but she pulled it right back. When I looked at her, she gripped it even tighter, and before I could say anything, she pressed her lips against mine. Her kiss was firm enough that the line between us seemed to blur. After a short moment, she pulled away.

Ever since summer vacation started, she’d been kissing me like it was the most natural thing in the world. I had no reason to refuse her—after all, I was the one who told her it was fine as long as she didn’t go too far—but lately, she hadn’t been holding back at all.

"That’s not what I meant when I said we should do something else. Why’d you jump straight to kissing me?"

"You didn’t want it?"

Sendai-san asked quietly.

"I don’t like the way you say that."

"Then should I have said it’s because I wanted to kiss you?"

"No, I don’t like that either."

"Then what do you want me to say?"

"Actually, why do you keep saying weird things like that anyway?"

"Well, it's because you asked."

"Even if I did ask, I still don't want you to say things like that."

I stretched my leg out like she had and kicked her ankle.

"Ouch."

She said, even though I hadn't kicked her that hard, so I did it again in protest. In return, she tightened her grip on my hand.

I looked at Sendai-san's face, and she immediately leaned forward to kiss me again. This time, though, she pulled away quickly. Even when I held her hand back, she didn't kiss me again.

I gave her leg one last light kick before letting go of her hand.

It had become natural for us to just be close enough to touch each other. It was even normal for us to be touching all the time now.

I'd gotten used to having Sendai-san always within my sight, and lately, I'd even started to want her there.

It wasn't that I'd changed; it was because Sendai-san kept doing things that made me feel that way.

— Or at least, that's what I wanted to believe.

The reason why I wanted her to kiss me again just now was simple: Sendai-san had taught me that we didn't need a reason to kiss.

Well, she hadn't exactly taught me that, but the way she kissed me so easily made me feel silly for even needing one in the first place.

Sendai-san had become too deeply tied to everything that made up who I was.

So many things—both inside me and around me—were shaped by her. The desire to kiss someone, the comfort in someone's warmth, this apartment, the word "roommates," even my earrings—none of them would've existed without her.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san called my name softly.

"What?"

"You don’t want to hold hands?"

"Not anymore."

I answered flatly, and Sendai-san leaned back against the bed.

Our shoulders, which had been pressed together, separated, leaving one side of my body feeling strangely empty.

Sendai-san could be really mean sometimes.

Even when I told her not to, she’d still grab my hand or cling to me. But in moments like this, she’d quietly pull away and never come back. I could never figure out what went on in her head.

Touching Sendai-san had let me learn things about her that no one else probably knew, but that alone wasn’t enough. I wanted to know more about the Sendai-san who kept intruding into my life—more than I did now. And until I did, the unease that had once disappeared but since come back would never go away.

I didn’t want to keep thinking about pointless things—like what if Sendai-san got closer to Maika than she was to me, or started seeing her alone; or what if she grew close to someone I didn’t know and brought them here. I just wanted to stop imagining things like that altogether.

"Sendai-san."

I tapped lightly at the back of her hand resting on the floor.

"What is it?"

"Give me your hand."

I placed my own hand on her thigh.

It was impossible to get my feelings across without saying them out loud.

Even if I couldn't put everything into words, I still wanted to express at least a little of what I felt.

But it never came out the way I wanted, and I knew I couldn't keep this up for long.

My shoulders were stiff, and my head felt heavy, like a stone was pressing down on the back of it, making it hard to breathe.

Things that would've been easy with anyone else felt impossibly difficult with Sendai-san. Just saying what I thought felt like trying to clear a game I could never beat.

"Like this?"

Sendai-san took my hand, and without being asked, pressed her lips against my cheek.

"Miyagi."

She said my name in a voice so warm I could almost feel it sink into my skin. That same warmth traveled from our joined hands through my body, spreading through my veins until even my blood felt hot.

When I looked at her, she kissed me again—the same way she had so many times today—but her lips soon left mine, leaving only my hand warm in their place. Sendai-san tapped the back of it with her fingers, and when I squeezed her hand back, she kissed me again, softly, again and again.

Even though I was the one who'd said it was fine for her to kiss me as long as she didn't go too far, I wasn't sure how much I'd let her get away with. Because of that, one part of me wanted to let her keep going as long as she wanted, while another part wanted to stop her right away. The two sides of me clashed so loudly inside my head that it almost hurt.

Ever since the other day, the solid line that had existed between me and Sendai-san had turned into something dotted, and she kept slipping through the gaps. I knew it was my own feelings towards her that had cut that line apart, but it was something I didn't want to admit.

After all, I still didn't want to make something special just to be able

to lose it someday.

If I could, I wanted to connect those dots and make it a single, straight line again. But I knew that was impossible.

I pushed at Sendai-san’s shoulder as she leaned in to kiss me again.

"That’s enough."

I said firmly.

Then, out of nowhere, Sendai-san suddenly said,

"You know, I kind of want some ice cream."

"We already had some yesterday."

"What I mean is, let’s go buy some at the convenience store."

Letting go of my hand, Sendai-san stood up.

"If you want some, go buy it yourself."

"Come on, let’s go together."

She said, leaning down and taking the hand she’d just let go of.

The Things I Want To Do With Sendai-san Without Needing A Reason (II)

Part 174

It was hot outside.

No matter how easily I got cold, summer was always unbearable.

Even though it was nearly evening, the air was still heavy and warm, and I would've much rather stayed home than gone out in the heat to buy ice cream.

But Sendai-san didn't seem to feel the same.

"Come on. Walk a little faster, Miyagi."

About three steps ahead of me, Sendai-san turned around and called out cheerfully. Even though she was usually sensitive to the heat, she seemed to be enjoying being outside and this small trip to the convenience store together.

"It'll just feel hotter if I speed up."

"Well, if you keep walking that slowly, it's just going to take us longer to get there."

Sendai-san pulled me along by the arm and started walking again. I followed, letting myself be pulled along, but my feet refused to move any faster. When she realized I wasn't planning to speed up, she took my hand instead.

We ended up walking side by side, hand in hand.

Walking like this made me remember what Maika once said—that when two people live together, anything they do together can count as a date.

Strictly speaking, she'd been talking about couples, not roommates like us.

Still, holding hands and walking side by side like this almost felt like a date.

"I'll walk at a normal pace, so let go of my hand already, Sendai-san."

It wasn't that Maika's words bothered me.

And I knew we weren't actually on a date.

But for some reason, I just didn't feel like holding her hand, so I pulled away.

"Aw, come on. It's fine if we hold hands, isn't it?"

Somewhere nearby, cicadas were chirping—a reminder that it really was summer. The breeze that passed now and then was warm and sticky, and the shade from the street trees was too thin to really block the sun. The sky hadn't started turning orange yet.

It was hot.

Our hands were hot. Our bodies too.

I wanted to let go, so I gave our joined hands a firm swing, but she still didn't let go. Instead, her grip tightened, and just as I opened my mouth to complain, Sendai-san suddenly stopped and said, "Oh, it's the little cali."

"The little cali?"

"The calico cat I told you about before. Look, it's coming over here."

Following her gaze, I spotted the same calico cat I'd seen once with Maika—the one Sendai-san and I had gone looking for together.

"Is that its name?"

"No, I just call it that because it's a calico."

Sendai-san said as she easily let go of my hand—the same hand she'd refused to release no matter what I did—and crouched down at the edge of the sidewalk.

"Come here, little cali."

The cat stopped and looked at us for a moment before walking up to Sendai-san and letting out a soft meow.

I wasn't reflected in the cat's eyes—or in Sendai-san's.

She crouched there, gently stroking its fur.

"It's been a while since we've seen each other, huh?"

She said.

Since the start of summer vacation, we'd been spending most of our time at home, so she hadn't had a chance to see the cat on her way back from school.

"You're still as cute as ever."

The cat purred and rolled onto its back, responding to her voice. It seemed friendlier than the day Maika and I had found it—maybe because it liked Sendai-san. It lay down right there on the sidewalk, inviting her to rub its belly.

Her hand moved back and forth along its fur, and she kept petting it like she'd forgotten I was there at all.

The cat looked happy, like it wanted her to keep petting it forever.

But since she'd be spending all summer with me, there wouldn't be many chances for her to see it again.

"Hey, how long do you plan to keep petting that cat for?"

I didn't feel any ill will toward the cat, but I didn't like being ignored for so long. Watching her attention shift somewhere else made my chest feel tight.

The anxiety that had melted away the day I touched Sendai-san was starting to take shape again. It gathered somewhere inside me, making me more aware of her than ever—of every small thing she did, and how easily it could stir up my feelings.

"Why don’t you pet it too, Miyagi?"

It wasn’t the cat I wanted to touch.

But I couldn’t say that out loud, so I crouched down and reached my hand out. The cat’s ears twitched the moment it noticed me. I froze for a second, hoping it wouldn’t run off, then tried to pet it gently. But before I could, it darted away.

"Sendai-san."

It wasn’t her fault, but I called her name in an accusatory tone anyway.

"I guess it feels threatened around someone of the same species."

"I’m not a cat, you know."

"I said it before, but you really remind me of one."

"I don’t think I’m like a cat at all."

I said as I stood up and tugged on Sendai-san’s arm, who was still crouched down.

"Come on, let’s get going. It’s too hot out here."

"Okay, okay."

Sendai-san got to her feet, and I let go of her arm.

The cat was nowhere to be seen.

With nothing left to steal her attention, the restless feeling in my chest finally began to settle.

I started to wonder if touching Sendai-san, and letting her touch me in return, was the only way to keep the anxiety away.

"Miyagi, don’t space out like that. It’s dangerous."

Sendai-san gave me a light tap on the shoulder, and I started walking again.

This time, she didn’t reach for my hand.

We walked quickly through the thick, muggy air. Before I knew it, we’d reached the convenience store, bought enough ice cream for three days, and headed back home.

Even though we walked faster on the way back, by the time we got to the refrigerator, the ice cream—which had slowly been cooked under the harsh sun—was already covered in condensation, as if it were starting to melt.

"Sendai-san, I’m putting all the ice cream in the freezer."

Without waiting for an answer, I stuffed everything we’d bought inside. But Sendai-san immediately opened the freezer again.

"Why? Let’s eat some now."

She pulled out a soda-flavored popsicle and a strawberry one.

"They look kind of melted. Wouldn’t it be better to let them freeze a bit first?"

"They’re not that melted."

Sendai-san didn’t look like she planned on giving in, and she headed back to her room with the popsicles. I had no choice but to follow behind her.

We sat on the floor against her bed, and she handed me the soda-flavored one.

I tore the wrapper open and took a bite of the sky-blue colored popsicle.

"I told you we should’ve let them freeze a bit first."

I complained, taking another bite. It tasted good, but the texture was soft and a little mushy.

"Oh, come on. It’s only a little melted."

"I don’t like it. It feels like it’s going to slide right off the stick."

"Well, guess you'd better eat it quickly, then."

Sendai-san said, taking a big bite from hers.

There were plenty of things I wanted to say to her, but instead, I stayed quiet and kept eating.

It was unbearably hot outside, but eating this popsicle almost made me glad we'd gone out to buy it.

I glanced to the side and saw Sendai-san looking pleased.

"Want a taste?"

Sendai-san asked, holding out her strawberry popsicle toward me. I hadn't meant to bother her, but she offered anyway. I looked at the red popsicle—already a third gone—then turned my eyes to her instead.

"Miyagi?"

She called my name, and I took her by the arm. But instead of biting her popsicle, I licked her lips with my tongue.

It tasted sweet.

But that alone wasn't enough to tell what flavor it was, so I licked her lips again—this time making sure to taste the faint strawberry from the popsicle.

"Sendai-san, your lips are cold."

Even then, I still couldn't make out the flavor.

"… Well, I was eating a popsicle, you know. But when I asked if you wanted a taste, I meant the popsicle, not my lips."

"If it's just a taste, does it really matter where it comes from?"

"Yes, it does. And weren't you the one who said you'd had enough kissing for today? Did you already forget?"

"That wasn't a kiss. I was just having a taste."

And because it wasn't a kiss, I could touch her lips if I wanted to.

Even if it had been a kiss, when I said I'd had enough for today, that only applied to her—not me.

"In that case, let me have a taste too."

"No."

I said, pressing my half-eaten popsicle against Sendai-san's neck.

"Wha—hey, that's cold!"

Sendai-san exclaimed louder than I expected and tried to back away.

With the faint stain of melted popsicle on her neck, I leaned forward, bit her there, and stopped her from moving any further.

I'd bitten her neck so many times before that my teeth sank in easily. I held back, careful not to hurt her so she wouldn't try to escape, and pressed my tongue against her skin.

Her neck, chilled slightly by the air conditioner, tasted so sweet it didn't seem like human skin. The spot that should've tasted like soda instead tasted like something else—a mix of Sendai-san's scent and sweat.

"Miyagi."

She tapped my shoulder lightly, and I pulled my lips away—only to bite her again. Then, I traced my tongue slowly down her neck. The sweetness had already faded, but I still pressed my lips against her collarbone, biting gently again and again. She stayed quiet this time, unlike the day I'd touched her.

That day was burned into my memory. No matter how much I tried to forget, I couldn't. I could still recall everything: her voice, her warmth, the way my fingers had gotten wet.

I wanted to see her look at me that way again, like I was the only one she wanted. I even wanted her to touch me again too. But doing things like this tied us together too deeply, and I knew it wasn't something we should keep doing.

"Hey, Miyagi!"

Sendai-san smacked my shoulder hard.

So I bit her shoulder back just as hard.

The popsicle in my hand had started to melt, sticky syrup running down my fingers.

"Miyagi, your popsicle's going to melt all over the floor."

I heard her but pretended not to, and kept biting her shoulder.

Sendai-san took the popsicle from my hand and called my name again. I reluctantly looked up at her.

"Open your mouth."

Her voice was low, and when I did as I was told, she stuck the popsicle into my mouth.

I had no choice but to finish the rest of the half-melted popsicle before wiping my sticky hands with a tissue.

"My hands are all sticky."

It wasn't a wet tissue, so of course it didn't help much.

"Obviously. And thanks to you doing something weird, now I'm sticky too."

Sendai-san sounded exasperated as she finished her own popsicle.

"I'm a cat, so it's fine if I lick you, isn't it?"

"Huh?"

"You said I was like a cat when we were walking to the convenience store, didn't you?"

"I did, but why would you do that while we're eating?"

"Do I really need a reason? Besides, if I hadn't done it, you probably would've, so I just beat you to it."

"You’re such an idiot, Miyagi. If you’re going to do something like that, at least wait until we’re done with our popsicles."

Sendai-san said, then pressed her lips to my neck.

Her breath was warm and damp—it tickled, and it felt nice.

But I’d already said I’d had enough kisses from her today, and if I let her keep going, I knew it wouldn’t stop there. So I pushed her away.

"Miyagi. Are you free the day after tomorrow?"

Instead of complaining, she just asked about my plans.

"Yeah, I’m free."

"Then how about we go out that day, like we talked about before?"

"Sure. Where are we going?"

"You’ll find out when we get there."

Sendai-san said happily with a smile on her face.

The Things I Want To Do With Sendai-san Without Needing A Reason (III)

Part 175

After riding the train for a while, we finally reached our stop.

Now, I was walking beside Sendai-san.

The reason for that was simple — when we'd left the house this morning, she'd said she wanted to keep our destination a surprise. Even now, I still had no idea where we were headed.

Only Sendai-san knew.

Of course, I had complaints.

I'd asked Sendai-san—who'd been in an unusually good mood—where we were headed, pointing out that I couldn't even decide what to wear if she wouldn't tell me. But instead of answering, she'd just handed me a skirt and said,

"Come to my room after you've changed into this."

She'd chosen my outfit like it was the most natural thing in the world. I'd even put on a bit of makeup for today, and now here we were, out together just like we'd promised.

"Are we there yet?"

I asked Sendai-san, who was walking right next to me.

"Almost."

She replied.

"How much further is that, exactly?"

"Just a little more."

I had no idea if she was telling the truth or not, but she kept walking ahead.

Today, Sendai-san was wearing a camisole, a blouse, and a light-colored skirt. She looked good in almost anything, but somehow, she looked even prettier than usual. Maybe it was just my imagination. Or maybe it was because we were somewhere new together.

Either way, something about her felt different, and it made me a little nervous.

"We'll be there once we take this."

Sendai-san said, stopping in front of an elevator.

"You wanted to take me to an aquarium?"

"Yep. Looks like you figured it out."

She said.

The elevator arrived, and we stepped inside.

"Of course I figured it out. There's literally a sign outside that says 'aquarium.' Why did you even keep it a secret?"

"Hmm…"

Sendai-san let out a small hum and fell silent.

The blue-painted elevator was filled with children's voices. Probably because it was summer break, it was packed full and noisy. But Sendai-san stayed quiet.

After a while, the elevator stopped, and we stepped out.

"I kept it a secret because I was afraid you'd say you didn't want to go."

She said at last, as we followed the crowd toward the entrance.

She was smart, beautiful, and good at everything she did.

And yet, despite how confident she always seemed, here she was admitting she'd been too afraid to tell me where she wanted to take me just because she thought I might say no. It didn't sound like she was lying, either.

You could've just invited me normally, I thought to myself.

I had no intention of backing out of our promise to go somewhere together, so I wouldn't have refused if she'd told me she wanted to go to the aquarium.

"But why an aquarium?"

I asked as we waited in line to buy tickets.

I'd never once heard her say she liked aquariums—or sea creatures, for that matter. Aquariums weren't exactly the kind of place friends usually went together, so I couldn't help wondering why she'd chosen it.

To me, it was the kind of place you'd go with family, or on a faraway vacation… or on a date.

… No, that last thought was just me overthinking it. It was Maika's fault for putting weird ideas in my head.

"Because you like animals, don't you, Miyagi?"

Just as my head was about to get crowded with all the things Maika said, Sendai-san suddenly said something completely nonsensical, and I found myself staring at her.

"… Aquariums are a place to look at fish, though."

Whether or not I actually liked animals aside, her logic made no sense.

"Good, I'm glad we're on the same page. I don't know how I would've reacted if you told me you were expecting to see giraffes here."

"That's not what I meant. Normally, if you're taking someone who likes animals somewhere, you'd take them to a zoo."

"Well, if you think about it, fish are animals too – like giraffes – so it's basically the same thing. And besides, zoos are hot because you have to walk around outside. Don't you think an aquarium's better since it's cooler indoors?"

Sendai-san said cheerfully, looking at me like she wanted me to agree.

"I guess that's true."

If I had to choose, I definitely preferred being somewhere cool over sweating outside, but I couldn't help thinking that Sendai-san's logic in lumping fish and giraffes together was a little ridiculous.

"Would you rather go to the zoo, Miyagi?"

"No, the aquarium's fine."

"Alright, then we'll do that today, and visit the zoo once the weather cools down."

Sendai-san said, already making plans for the future without asking, so I immediately replied with,

"We don't have to go to the zoo."

"Come on, what's the harm? You like animals, don't you?"

"I wouldn't say I like them that much."

"Guess you better start liking them, then."

There were a lot of people waiting in line for tickets, and it was packed. I wasn't so lacking in common sense that I'd complain or kick Sendai-san in a place like this, so all I could do was go along with what she was saying.

"… Fine. If you're going to insist that much, then I'll go."

It wasn't like I loved animals, but I didn't dislike them either, so I didn't mind the idea of going to see them someday.

"That settles it, then."

After casually deciding our plans for after summer vacation, Sendai-san paid for our tickets with one of the five-thousand-yen bills I'd given her back in high school. I wasn't thrilled that she was using that money on me, but she'd been insisting on it since morning, so I couldn't really stop her.

I swallowed down the complaint rising in my throat and stepped into the aquarium.

A vast expanse of blue—like the depths of the sea—unfolded before me. The place was crowded and noisy, packed with as many people as there were fish, but being surrounded by the deep blue around me somehow made the noise fade away.

"Should we follow the route?"

Sendai-san asked, and I replied, "Sure," as we started walking together.

We passed by tanks filled with brightly colored fish, schools of sardines, and oddly shaped sharks. The aquarium was packed with people—children walking happily beside their parents stood out to me the most—but I didn't feel like comparing what I was seeing now to my own past. Looking for fish together with Sendai-san was far more enjoyable.

Still, something else kept catching my attention.

Seeing all the couples holding hands or linking arms reminded me that aquariums really were meant for dates. And it made me think back to the day Maika came over.

Maika had once asked Sendai-san if she'd ever had a crush on anyone, but she never gave her an answer.

I stopped in front of a large tank where stingrays and sharks drifted through the water.

"… Sendai-san, do you not plan on getting a boyfriend?"

It was a bit of a roundabout way to ask what I really wanted to know, but in a place like this—where people often came with their partners—it didn't feel too strange to bring it up. I watched the stingrays swim by, graceful as if they were flying through the air,

and waited for her reply.

"No, not really. I don't feel the need to go out of my way to find someone either."

Sendai-san answered without hesitation.

"Why not?"

"Well, it's not like you can just decide to have a romantic partner. Things like that happen naturally when the timing is right."

""When the timing is right," huh. That sounds like something only popular people get to say."

"I'm not that popular, you know."

Sendai-san immediately denied it, then pointed toward one of the tanks.

"Hey, isn't that yellow fish kind of cute?"

"Not really."

I answered flatly, then steered the conversation back to what I actually wanted to talk about.

"Didn't you get confessed to a lot back in high school?"

"I mean, I guess that did happen a few times. But if it's not from someone I like, it doesn't really mean anything, does it?"

Sendai-san, who had been staring intently at a tank that looked like a piece of the ocean itself, said that in an unusually serious tone before turning to look at me.

"What about you, Miyagi? Do you want a boyfriend?"

"No."

"I see."

Her eyes drifted back toward the fish.

Even without her swearing it on my earring, I could tell she wasn't lying when she said she didn't plan on finding a boyfriend.

But whether she liked someone or not—that, I couldn't tell.

It wasn't something I'd ever know unless I asked. And if there was ever a time to ask, it was now.

I took a quiet breath, slowly exhaled, and finally asked the question that had been sitting in my head.

"… Do you have someone you like? You didn't answer when Maika asked you before."

"Wow, that's rare. For you to bring up something like this."

"So what if it is? Just answer."

"Someone I like, huh… let's see."

She said quietly, her words trailing off.

Then, under the soft blue glow, she turned toward me with an unusually bright smile.

"— Yeah. There is."

"Huh?"

My voice slipped out before I could stop it. I wanted to cover my ears.

I didn't want to hear any names—whether I knew them or not. I hesitated, unsure if I should ask who it was.

I knew it was unnatural for me to stay silent for so long, but I couldn't get any words out.

Before I could decide what to do, Sendai-san followed up with,

"I really like the little cali. It's just so cute."

"… That's not a person. That's a cat."

I couldn’t tell if she was being serious or just teasing me, but hearing that name made the tension in my shoulders fade away.

When she started laughing, I lightly smacked her arm.

The “little cali” she was referring to was a stray cat she often saw on her way home from university—a cat she was rather fond of. But I hadn’t been asking about her favorite cat.

"Well, these days, cats are the only ones who catch my attention anyway."

Sendai-san said. Then, she followed up with, “Anyway, shall we get going?” and started walking ahead.

Chapter 60

I Want to Keep Looking at Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 176

That surprised me.

I hadn't expected that from Miyagi at all.

I never thought she'd bring up the topic of crushes now of all times.

As we walked, I took slow, careful breaths, trying to calm my heart that felt like it might stop any second.

I hadn't wanted to lie to her, so I answered honestly, but that was probably a mistake. I thought I'd managed to sound like my usual self, but from the way she was glaring daggers into my back, it was clear she didn't buy it.

Afraid she'd say something if I turned around, I pointed ahead instead.

"Oh look, we're in the jellyfish section now."

I didn't want her continuing the conversation about crushes, so I tried to steer her attention toward the glowing tanks instead.

In the dim light, I walked up to a tank filled with softly glowing jellyfish.

There were more jellyfish than I'd expected, drifting through the water. The air felt almost enchanted. The deep blue around us blended so seamlessly with the glow of the tanks that it almost felt like I was floating right there with them.

"I know getting stung by a jellyfish would hurt a lot, but they're so pretty to look at. It's kind of soothing."

I said, staring at the tank filled with jellyfish. Miyagi walked up beside me and murmured,

"Yeah. I feel like I could watch them forever."

I shifted my gaze from the tank to Miyagi and saw she was staring intently at the jellyfish.

Earlier…

If I'd told her that she was the one I liked instead of the little cali, what would've happened?

What if I said it right now?

I knew I could never actually say something like that. Someone like me, who didn't want to risk losing what we already had, couldn't possibly do it.

Still, I couldn't stop imagining it.

If I told Miyagi I liked her, would she say she liked me too?

I knew she didn't hate me. I could tell she felt something for me, but I didn't know what kind of feeling it was, or how deep it went.

I wished she felt the same way I did.

We'd done things that would make anyone think we were already dating. Most of the time, that was enough for me.

But sometimes, I found myself wanting Miyagi's heart, too.

Even so, I didn't have the courage to say something that might destroy what we already had, just for the chance to get closer.

No matter how many times I thought about it, I always reached the same conclusion.

Maybe things would change someday, but for now, I just wanted to keep looking at her like this—with this quiet, happy feeling.

"Hey, Miyagi. They've got seals upstairs. Or do you want to keep looking at the jellyfish?"

I said in a cheerful voice, hoping to shake off my own thoughts.

"Let's go upstairs."

I'd thought about taking Miyagi to the zoo since she seemed to like animals, but with how sensitive I was to heat, that was out of the question. I'd wanted to take her somewhere she could see platypuses or crocodiles—like the ones on our tissue box covers—but apparently there weren't any platypuses in Japan, and I didn't think crocodiles alone were worth going out of our way to see. In the end, I'd chosen the aquarium because both of those animals were aquatic anyway, and it seemed like that had been the right decision.

… But since aquariums were usually date spots, I'd found it hard to invite her directly.

"It kind of looks like a jungle up here. Are you sure the seals are here?"

Miyagi mumbled as we climbed the stairs.

The area we'd entered looked like it was modeled after the tropics, and there didn't seem to be any sign of seals around. I pulled the pamphlet out of my bag to check where they were.

"Looks like they're a little further in. Want to go see them first?"

"No, it's fine. Let's just keep following the route."

We walked at a relaxed pace, stopping to look at both the big and small fish along the way. There were turtles and iguanas too, which I thought were pretty interesting.

When we finally reached the seal enclosure, Miyagi's face lit up. She wasn't squealing with excitement or anything, but when a seal swam up to the glass, she leaned in so close her head nearly bumped it. It was obvious she preferred mammals to fish.

Since it wasn't often that I got to see her look genuinely happy, I found my gaze drawn more to Miyagi than the seals themselves.

There were sea lions and small-clawed otters on the rooftop too. Maybe I'd get to see her even happier when we went up there. The

thought alone made me a little excited.

Without letting her notice, I watched Miyagi as she stared at the seals. It made me wish we were alone, but unfortunately, the aquarium was packed since it was summer break.

Next time, I wanted to come again when it was quieter. Just the two of us.

As I was thinking that, Miyagi turned to me.

"Are you getting hungry, Sendai-san?"

"… Yeah, I am."

I hadn't realized it until she mentioned it, but I really was starting to feel hungry. When I glanced at my phone, I saw it was already past lunchtime. We reluctantly left the seals and went to find something to eat.

"Looks like there's a café on the rooftop. Want to grab a bite there?"

"Sure."

We passed tanks of clownfish and river fish hiding among the sea anemones before heading up to the rooftop café. Deciding to check out the sea lions and otters later, we ordered hot dogs, iced tea, and one pancake to share.

"Let's eat."

We said in unison before digging in.

We were both so hungry that our hot dogs disappeared almost instantly. As Miyagi sipped her iced tea, she stared intently at the pancake that couldn't be found anywhere else.

"It looks so cute."

She said quietly, her voice lighter than usual. She wasn't exactly chatty, but she'd been talking more than usual today.

I knew what she meant.

The pancake had an otter drawn on it, and it really was adorable. But in order to eat it, that meant we'd have to sacrifice the otter.

"Can I cut it up?"

I asked, and Miyagi replied, "Sure."

So I plunged the knife right into the otter's face and began slicing it in half. Miyagi made a sound of protest, but I ignored it and kept cutting the pancake into bite-sized pieces.

"You're cutting it so heartlessly, Sendai-san."

She sighed as I took a bite of what I'd just cut.

"Well, even if you feel sorry for it, it's still meant to be eaten. If you pity it that much, does that mean you're not going to have any?"

"… No, I will."

"That's good. While we're at it, want me to feed it to you?"

"I can eat it by myself just fine."

"Aw, what a shame."

After finishing the pancake, we left the café.

Unlike inside the building, it was hot out on the rooftop.

But despite that, Miyagi still seemed to be in high spirits. Her steps were light as she walked ahead of me.

I glanced between her and the sea lions and small-clawed otters nearby. She wasn't exactly brimming with excitement, but she looked like she was enjoying herself, just like she had when we saw the seals earlier. Seeing her like that made me feel happy, too.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder—if she'd come to the aquarium with Utsunomiya instead, would she have been more excited? Maybe she'd be pointing things out, gushing about the seals swimming up to the glass, saying how cute the sea lions were, and running from one tank to the next.

I let out a small sigh and pressed my temples.

Thinking about her any more would just make me miserable, so I pushed Utsunomiya out of my mind.

Miyagi seemed to prefer the small-clawed otters to the seals and sea lions. She looked like she didn't want to leave them.

"Small-clawed otters look a lot like platypuses, don't they?"

I asked, watching her stare at a few otters sleeping side by side.

"Not at all."

"Really?"

"If you think otters and platypuses look alike, you should get your eyes checked."

Miyagi retorted with a rude remark before walking away.

As we continued along the route, a voice louder than usual came from beside me.

"Sendai-san, look! There are so many penguins here!"

Miyagi said, pointing toward a tank designed to look like a grassy plain.

Sure enough, there were several penguins waddling around inside.

"If we go a little further ahead, we can see them from below."

I said, repeating something I'd read before coming here.

"From below?"

"Yeah. Apparently you can watch them swim right above your head."

"I want to see. Where is it?"

After checking the pamphlet, I pointed in the direction we needed to go, and Miyagi grabbed my arm.

"Let’s go."

She said, pulling me along.

We weren’t holding hands, but she kept tugging at my arm as we walked. Her skirt swayed as she moved ahead of me, and before long, I could see penguins flying above us.

Of course, they weren’t really flying. There was a tank built above the walkway, and when we stepped underneath it, we could look up and see the penguins swimming through the water overhead.

"Wow. It really looks like they’re flying through the sky."

Miyagi said, letting go of my arm and looking up.

Since the exhibit was on the rooftop, the penguins really did look like they were soaring through the air.

But I couldn’t take my eyes off Miyagi.

What I was seeing was far rarer than penguins that looked like they were flying through the sky.

She was smiling.

Miyagi was actually smiling—and she looked genuinely happy.

She used to smile with her friends during high school, and I’d seen her smile when Utsunomiya came over too. But when it was just the two of us, she rarely smiled. In fact, she usually looked grumpy.

And yet, here she was, smiling in front of me.

I barely even looked at the penguins.

All I wanted to do was keep looking at her.

It was a little disappointing that her smile wasn’t directed at me, but still, just seeing her smile while we were together made me happy.

"Do you like penguins?"

I asked as she continued gazing up at the tank.

"I wouldn’t say I like them or anything, but they’re cute."

She replied cheerfully, in a voice that made it seem like she actually did like them.

She didn’t even seem to realize she was smiling as she kept watching the penguins swim overhead.

"Miyagi."

"What?"

"They’re really cute, aren’t they?"

"The penguins?"

She asked, still looking up.

"Yeah."

The penguins were cute.

But Miyagi was even cuter.

I wanted to tell her that, but I was afraid saying it would wipe the smile off her face.

Under the blue sky, the penguins’ white bellies passed overhead again and again.

Pretending to watch them, I kept my eyes on Miyagi instead.

The smile she never showed at home glimmered in the sunlight.

It was even hotter outside now than before.

But all I wanted was to keep looking at her like this forever.

I Want to Keep Looking at Miyagi (II)

Part 177

Today, I might die. That's how cheerful Miyagi is.

The final exhibit in the aquarium tour was flying penguins, yet she seems to have taken a liking to the rooftop area. Smilingly, she suggests we go around that section once more.

Typically, an aquarium isn't a place where you loop around to see the same things again and again. But if it means Miyagi remains happy, I'd keep circling here forever.

Even if I get sunburned, even with sweat trickling down my forehead, I don't care.

We exchange greetings with the seals and the small-clawed otters before finding ourselves back in front of the penguins.

"Miyagi, the sea lion show is about to start. Do you want to watch?"

I call out to Miyagi, who won't tear her gaze away from the penguins.

"No need. Is there anything you want to see again, Sendai-san?"
"Not really."

What I want to see is Miyagi. If she doesn't want to watch the sea lion show, neither do I. If she thinks there's nothing left in the aquarium worth seeing, then there isn’t for me either.

"Then let's go home."

Miyagi finally shifts her gaze from the penguins and says dismissively.

"Already? You don't want to stop by anywhere?"

I don't feel like going home just yet.

It's not that there's something specific I want to see or somewhere I must visit, but I just want to keep watching Miyagi as she enjoys herself, hopefully through the night as well. However, she emotionlessly replies, "No need to stop anywhere."

"Alright then, let's head home. Do you not want to buy a penguin plushie?"

Given her apparent fondness for the penguins, I ask, but she looks at me quizzically.

"Do you want a penguin plushie, Sendai-san?"
"I don't need one, but it seems like you liked the penguins a lot."
"I don't need it. I already have plushies."

"Miyagi, you have a penguin plushie?"

That's news to me. In her room back in high school, I never saw such a thing. Plushies aren't items you hide away, so if she has one, she must have acquired it as a university student.

It's not a problem to buy plushies. However, I dislike the idea that someone might have given it to her. Even more, having a plushie gifted by someone else displayed in her room would bother me.

In the depths of my heart, a drop of dark ink falls and begins to spread. Not just internally, but even on the surface a dark stain starts to appear, and Miyagi's curt voice breaks through.

"Not a penguin, a cat. Didn't you give that to me on Christmas, Sendai-san? Forgot, did you?"

With her words, the dark stain spreading in my heart dissipates.

A black cat plushie, subtly resembling Miyagi.

It's impossible for me to forget something I gave her. I also clearly remember she didn't look particularly happy when she received it.

"I remember. ...Did the plushie move with you too?"

Back in high school, the black cat lived on Miyagi's bookshelf. But since I've never been in her new room, I have no idea what happened to the black cat. If it's on her bookshelf just like back

then, irrespective of the fact I gifted it, I'd be extremely pleased.

"I brought it with me, so no need for another plushie."

The cheerful Miyagi from moments ago now has a slight furrow on her brow. I restrain the urge to hug her, feeling buoyant, and respond with a simple "I see."

It seems the black cat plushie I gifted is reasonably adored by Miyagi, who is cat-like herself. Actually, since she says she doesn't need a penguin plushie because she has the cat, it might be quite cherished.

Thinking of it surpassing even this penguin that captivated Miyagi makes me envious to the point I'd like to be that plushie. But if I turned into the black cat plushie, I'd miss out on coming to the aquarium with Miyagi or kissing her. So, not to the extent of wanting to stop being human.

"Shall we head home then? But could we grab something to eat on the way back? I'm too lazy to cook dinner tonight. Unless you want to cook for me too, Miyagi?"

I'm fine with respecting her wish not to stop by anywhere, but I still want to take it easy.

"I don't feel like cooking today either."

Since we're in agreement, we start walking.

"What do you feel like eating, Miyagi?"
"We had bread earlier, so maybe a bento."
"Alright."

Though I wanted to stay here forever, hearing something delightful has me leaving the aquarium with a light step. The crease on Miyagi's forehead vanishes too.

We leisurely head toward the station.

Usually, there aren't many common topics that Miyagi and I could get excited about, but today is different. There's plenty to talk about.

"What's the difference between a seal and a sea lion, I wonder."

I ask Miyagi, imagining the two creatures whose differences I know exist but can't explain.

"Shape, maybe?"
"Well, they do look different, but there must be more distinct differences."
"I wouldn't know. Look it up, Sendai-san."
"Maybe I will when we get home."

It may not be a particularly meaningful conversation, but Miyagi is talkative, making it enjoyable. As we continue with this trivial yet significant chat for me, for some reason, we slow our walking pace a bit. Conversation halts, and we can clearly hear the bustling city around us.

"...Sendai-san, do you often visit aquariums?"

Miyagi asks, not looking at me.

"I went a few times with my family as a kid, but not really after I grew up. What about you, Miyagi?"
"Same. I think I went once when I was little. ...We didn’t have many family outings."
"Is that so?"
"My father's always busy and hardly at home."

Miyagi uncharacteristically talks about her family. Her gaze remains away from me, fixed ahead.

I'm uncertain whether to voice the thought that comes to mind. Usually, she wouldn’t answer. But today, I think she might.

"...What about your mother?"

After Miyagi decided to room with me, her father came to greet my family at our home. However, her mother did not come, and Miyagi rarely speaks of her mother, even if she mentions her father.

"She's not around."

Predictably, this was her reply. Perhaps it was something I shouldn’t have asked, but part of me wants to delve deeper.

Still, Miyagi doesn't look my way. It's as if there's a rule forbidding her from looking anywhere but forward.

I don't want today to leave a bad memory for Miyagi. I want her to return home with only happy recollections. Both Miyagi and I should end this day on a happy note.

"I see."

I reply briefly and search for the next words. They don't come easily, words I should say to Miyagi, who has shared something she's never shared before.

On the way to the station, there's a decent number of people walking about, making it not the sort of place for in-depth discussions. The overlapping voices of people speaking nearby and afar form a nonsensical hum in my ears. I slowly inhale and exhale.

"You probably already know this, Miyagi, but my family doesn't get along very well... However, when I was a kid, we were on good terms, so they would take me to places like aquariums and zoos."

After I shared this bit to reciprocate Miyagi's openness, she finally turned to look at me.

To be precise, I should say, "It's just me that doesn't get along with my family, while the rest of them seem to get along just fine." But to explain all that properly would require too many additional explanations.

"You have an older sister, right?" she asked.
"Yeah, I do."
"...Do you not get along?"
"Not really," I replied.

My sister, who is two years older, and I keep our distance. We don't have sharp, obvious disagreements, but it's been years since we had a proper conversation. Despite living close enough that we could meet easily, we haven't even bothered to stay in touch.

"Sendai-san."

We passed through the ticket gates, and Miyagi softly called out to me.

"What is it?"
"...Thank you for today. I had fun at the aquarium."

I heard her words clearly, but my mind was slow to process them. As a result, I couldn't find any words to say in response.

"Sendai-san?"
"Oh, sorry. I just didn't expect you to say you had fun."

I had seen her enjoying herself at the aquarium. She'd been laughing, even getting a bit carried away. But I didn't expect her to go out of her way to tell me she had a good time. For Miyagi to tell me she had fun felt as unlikely as winter following immediately after summer.

"What do you think I am, Sendai-san? There are times when I do say I'm having fun."

"Then, from now on, let me know if you have fun like you did today."
"Why would you want to know that?"
"Because I want to understand what makes you happy."

If I could learn what makes Miyagi happy, even in small ways, maybe I could bring a smile to her face again, like today.

"...If something fun happens and I remember, I'll tell you."
"That's good enough for me."

Miyagi's answer was noncommittal, but for now, it was sufficient. The fact that she didn't outright reject the idea was progress.

"Do you want to hold hands?"

I said something I knew Miyagi would never agree to, nudging her arm playfully with my elbow.

"No."

As expected, she didn't break her usual pattern. She'd probably have kicked my leg if we were at home.

Still, I think, that's very like Miyagi.

Wanting her to at least glance my way, I nudged her with my elbow again, and she spoke softly.

"...When are we going to the zoo?"

I almost let out a surprised "Eh," but swallowed it back. Saying something unnecessary and making her retract the suggestion would have been problematic.

"Winter's too cold, maybe in the fall?"
"I'll remember that."

Miyagi gave a concise reply. Summer vacation wasn't over yet.

Although I wanted to do more fun things with Miyagi, I couldn't help but hope for autumn to arrive sooner.

I Want to Keep Looking at Miyagi (III)

Part 178

Five thousand yen for three times a week.
Last summer, I suddenly found myself being tutored by Sendai-san, who proposed this arrangement.

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Back then, she would visit almost every other day. This year, though, she's beside me every day. She greets me with a "good morning" and "good night," not because of five thousand yen or the pretext of tutoring. While she's neither family nor merely a friend, she's become a part of my daily sight, and today, she's within my view once again.

"Miyagi, how about a little break?"

It's been just over three hours since we started our binge of a foreign drama series.
The voice from beside me sounds a bit tired, or rather, a bit bored of watching the screen.

"Just one more episode."

Three hours is a long time, but we're still midway through season one, meaning there's much more ahead. The curiosity to see what happens next makes it feel too early to take a break.

"Well then, you keep watching, Miyagi."

Even though it was a series we both chose to watch together, Sendai-san irresponsibly turns over on the bed.

"Keep watching? If I do that, you won't know the storyline."
"It's fine, it's fine. I'll ask you to fill me in later."

With a casual air, Sendai-san speaks from her sprawled position on the bed.
Since it's her room, she can lounge or flit about all she wants, but

when she tells me to watch alone after agreeing to watch together, it feels different.

"No, I won't tell you. Just sit properly and watch yourself."
"I'm tired."
"You're just bored."
"I'm not bored, just tired of sitting. Hey, how about a change of scenery?"

"You always want to go out, Sendai-san. We already went to the aquarium the other day; isn't that enough for now?"

We'd already fulfilled plans to go out a few days ago. Plans for a zoo visit and another aquarium trip are in the works, but those are set for autumn and still undecided.

"It's summer vacation, after all. Let's enjoy more summery things. Going out together is fun."
"No way. What's even considered ‘summery’?"

I don't know where she wants to go, but it's evening already. I can't imagine needing to go anywhere at this hour, and just because it's summer doesn't mean we have to do summery things.

"Like going to a pool or watching fireworks?"
"It's not the time for a pool and there are no fireworks today. You also mentioned wanting to go on a hot spring trip the other day, but you always say these random things. If you really want to go somewhere, think about it seriously."
"How about going out for ice cream?"
"We did that already."
"Then, how about having dinner out?"

I feel that just being in this room is enough without doing anything special for summer.

Even though I'm used to being alone, that doesn't mean I like it, and I've always hated long holidays. But now that Sendai-san is here, I don't think holidays are so bad, and it seems like there will be fun things to do.

But I don't want to go out now.

"Let's not. I'll read manga. You take a break over there, Sendai-san."

Rejecting Sendai-san's suggestion, I pause the drama still playing, grab my phone, and open an e-book. While using the bed as back support, I feel a tug on my hair from behind.

"Miyagi."

Her voice descends from above my head.
Apparently, she has given up lazing around and sat up.

"What?"

I respond without looking away from my phone.

"I'm bored."
"Want to watch more drama?"
"No."

With a weak reply, my hair gets tugged again. Not just once; she gathers it and gives a gentle pull, continuing to play with it quietly.

"What are you doing?"

I ask while scrolling through pages and get a "Braiding" in return.
It's then I realize she's pointlessly braiding my hair and unbraiding it repeatedly.

"Is it fun?"
"Quite."

I don't understand what's fun about it, but since it doesn't hinder my reading, and she seems to enjoy it, I let her be.

Though I've read this manga several times and can recall the next lines without turning pages, I keep scrolling through them.
In the small screen of my phone, the story unfolds.
Sendai-san's fingers, not just toying with my hair but occasionally brushing my ears and neck, bring a warmth that can't be felt through strands alone, a warmth that's comforting.

"Why don't you come over here, Miyagi?"

Having tired of braiding, she quietly suggests this and places a gentle kiss on the top of my head.

"I won't. You're up to something weird."
"Would you not like that, Miyagi?"
"I wouldn't."

I place my phone on the table but continue facing away from her.

"Today, wouldn't it be okay if you became confused?"

She whispers this close to my ear, prompting me to push her head away.

Bringing up what happened before isn't fair.

I suppress the urge to flee. The aquarium was unexpectedly enjoyable, so I made an effort to express my thoughts, but perhaps I overdid it, saying things best left unsaid.

"It wouldn't be."

"Then, how long should I wait?"

Sendai-san asks in a soft voice.

"Wait forever."
"Do you think I can wait that long, Miyagi?"
"Try your best to wait."
"You don't really dislike it, do you, Miyagi?"

Instead of saying she'll wait, Sendai-san throws a new question at me.

I don't want to answer.

Saying I don't mind might imply consent, while declaring I hate it might mean she'd stop touching me altogether; neither is what I want to say.

"Miyagi."

Her hand runs through my hair.
Her fingers trace behind my ear, slowly caressing my neck.

"You're annoying, Sendai-san."

I give her incessant finger a gentle swat, and without resistance, she retracts her hand, and I hear a soft "thud" from behind. Turning towards the bed, I find her lying there.

"It’s okay, I’ll wait."

With those words, she reassuringly smiles at me. However, her actions don't match her words. Her hand, just withdrawn, reaches out to touch my chin, fingers sliding down to rest above my collarbone.

"This isn’t okay."

I catch her hand before it finds its way under my t-shirt.
While she says she'll wait, it's like she's really saying she wants to do something now.

"I just want to enjoy touching you, Miyagi. I won't go further without permission."

Sendai-san might lack any sense of shame. She voices things like this without hesitation.
Last time, too, she admitted things one wouldn't normally say when I asked about how it felt.

Ordinarily, such things wouldn’t be spoken aloud.

As a result, there are times when I wonder what she might have done since then. Of course, it's a topic hard to bring up, so I've never asked, but sometimes I'm curious whether she would answer if I did.

"Stop touching me. I'm trying to read."

I firmly remove the hand resting on my collarbone.

"If I don't touch you, I'll feel cold."

Sendai-san insists on something absurd, and as she attempts to extend her hand again, I seize it and pin it against the bed with my own, essentially sealing it there.

"You're not cold. You're hot, aren’t you?"

The warmth of her hand layered on mine atop the bed is intense. Despite her preference for rooms cool enough to make me shiver, this room has recently been kept at a temperature that suits my comfort. Today, too, the temperature is just right for me, so there's no way she could be cold.

"You're right. It is hot. Pass me the remote. I'll make it cooler."
"You mean less hot, right? It's usually the latter."
"I thought I might set it to a chill that'll make you want to snuggle up to me."
"Stop saying silly things, Sendai-san, and keep quiet."

I release her hand and gently press her lips with my fingertip. It doesn't stop her from speaking, but it prompts her to momentarily fall silent.

Her lips part slightly.
When I press my finger inside, her tongue curls around it.
My finger becomes wet, and I distinctly feel her warmth.

Between the first and second knuckles.

A light bite is applied.
It's just a gentle nibble, so it doesn't hurt.
The pressure fluctuates softly, repeatedly loosening and tightening.
It's a soothing sensation—the warmth of her tongue pressing against me and the intermittent firmness of her teeth.

I slowly withdraw my finger and observe it.
The wetness on my finger brings back memories.
The day I made the first move and touched Sendai-san.
This finger was wet with something else then.

"Miyagi."

I hear her voice.
But when I don't respond, she climbs down from the bed and sits beside me.

"Let me wipe your finger."

With that, Sendai-san takes a tissue from the platypus plush's back and wipes my finger clean.

"Miyagi, you were thinking something lewd just now, weren’t you?"
"I wasn't."
"Are you sure?"
"Really sure. You’re the lewd one, Sendai-san."

I grab the platypus plush and give her thigh a playful swat.

Volume 7 Interlude

A Distant Memory, a Promise with Miyagi

(Sendai PoV)

Part 178-extra

I made a promise with Miyagi to go somewhere, but there isn't really a place that comes to mind. I wanted the promise to be something enjoyable for Miyagi, so I asked, "Is there anywhere you want to go?" She just replied, "Stay at home," leaving us with no destination as time passed by. After all, home is a place to stay, not a place to go. Miyagi always gives me such unexpected answers

Because of this, what would have been a simple promise with anyone else is coming undone at just the preparatory stage of deciding on a destination. I flop onto the floor, pulling the platypus-themed tissue cover onto my stomach.

"Do you know any good places?" I ask the platypus, squeezing its soft hand.

The platypus cover, now lounging on my stomach, is something Miyagi chose from amidst a multitude of tissue covers when we went to buy an electric kettle. Looking at its cute, relaxed face, I thought it would be nice to go to a place with lots of things like this, but all I could picture was Miyagi saying she wanted to go home. She doesn't seem to dislike cute things, yet she never admits she likes them.

"Hmm, cute things. Tissue covers, platypuses, crocodiles...—a zoo," I mutter.

Besides the platypus tissue cover, Miyagi had a crocodile tissue cover in her room when she was in high school. She even knew about a dog breed, the Borzoi, which I was unfamiliar with, so I had once asked her if she liked animals. She denied it at the time, but I still suspect she's fond of animals. While she seems to like cute things, animals might be more important to her, so a zoo shouldn't be a bad idea. Though crocodiles aren't rare, she might be happy to

see a platypus.

Yet, there’s one problem: summer at the zoo is predictably scorching. Guiding Miyagi around under the blazing sun seems impossible; I’d prefer a cooler place. Moreover, Miyagi was hesitant to go out, citing "the heat" as a reason.

"… Is there anywhere you can see platypuses other than zoos?" I muse, picking up my phone to search for indoor locations that feature platypuses.

However, my hopes are quickly dashed.

"There's nowhere in Japan where you can see platypuses, let alone indoors."

As the conversation went back to square one, I let out a sigh. If platypuses can't be found in Japan, I can't think of any place likely to make Miyagi happy.

"Platypuses, crocodiles, platypuses, crocodiles…"

It's not a word association game, but I tried to find something in common between the two, while gently stroking the head of the stuffed platypus on my lap.

That's it. A connection comes to mind: both platypuses and crocodiles live near water.

"Aquarium."

Considering what might interest Miyagi, an aquarium isn’t a bad idea. Unlike a zoo, aquariums are mainly indoors, so even though they might be crowded during the summer holidays, they're not as hot as being outside. While she might not see a crocodile, I don't think she would specifically want to see one. I don't know if Miyagi likes fish, but I've never heard her say she dislikes them. It seems like there's no other place that offers even a slight chance of sparking her interest and possibly making the conversation lively—even if only by a little.

I sit up and place the platypus on my lap, searching for aquariums on my phone.

So many aquariums appear that it becomes difficult to choose, and I tug on the platypus's hand.

I can't pick a location that would require an overnight stay; Miyagi insisted on just a day trip. That narrowed down the options.

"I wonder if there's a good place nearby."

Searching for aquariums within a range that Miyagi wouldn't object to, I find several spots that meet her criteria and begin checking their official websites.

If we're going to visit an aquarium, I'd like for it to be one where Miyagi will enjoy herself the most. Having her choose the destination would be the safest way, but I doubt she'd straightforwardly pick one. If asked, she'd invariably reply, "You decide, Sendai-san."

Big fish, small fish. Dolphins, seals, penguins. While there's much to see, I want to take her to the place where what would make her happiest is seen most beautifully.

"What's fun to see at an aquarium?" I contemplate, gripping the platypus's hand.

I can't picture Miyagi's face looking pleased.

If it were me—what would I want to see?

Though I've been to an aquarium before, it was when I was little, and my memories are hazy. Besides, they aren't memories I particularly want to revisit.

Because the images of my family appear in those memories.

I've been to aquariums several times. The most recent memory is from when I was in the second grade.

My sister, two years older than me, was with me.

* * *

"Big sister, there's a weird fish!" I said, tugging on my sister's arm as we stood in front of a tank.

"Which one?" she asked.

"The thin, long one," I replied, pointing at a silver, shiny, slender fish.

"Hmm, that’s a cutlassfish," she explained.

"What kind of fish is that?" I inquired further.

"It’s supposed to be delicious when you eat it," she answered with a smile.

"Really?" I nodded, taking in her explanation, and she added, "That's what it said in a book."

"How about that one?" I pointed to a tank where small fish gathered to form what looked like a big fish, something I'd seen in picture books.

"Hm, those are probably sardines," she said.

"Sardines! I know those. It's a kind of fish we can eat, right?"

"Yes, we had them for dinner the other day, didn’t we?" she reminded me.

"Yeah, they were tasty."

"I want to eat them again," she suggested with a grin. We stood there smiling, watching the sardines intently, moving on from tank to tank in fascination.

"Big sister, what's that?" I pointed to an interesting-looking fish at the bottom of the tank.

"That’s a bullhead shark," she replied swiftly.

I might not have known much about fish, but my sister had boasted she’d studied up on them before we came to the aquarium, so she was answering all my questions effortlessly. My sister was amazing. She always taught me everything, and she hardly ever made any mistakes.

"Is it called a nekozame (cat shark) because it looks like a cat?" I wondered aloud.

"They're called that because the bumps above their eyes look like cat ears," she explained.

"Really? They don't really look like cat ears," I replied skeptically.

"But wouldn't it be fun if their ears moved and they meowed?"

"Fish don't meow," I stated confidently.

"True," she admitted with a laugh, and I couldn't help but laugh too. Though you shouldn't be noisy in an aquarium, we chuckled quietly and moved to a tank that looked like a coral reef, filled with colorful fish. Some were even familiar to me.

"Big sister, look! There are clownfish!" I pulled her arm and we both giggled happily.

"You're right, they're really cute."

"Can you eat that kind of fish?" I wondered.

"Hmm, I'm not sure…"

"But?" I leaned in, curious.

"Hazuki seems to like them a lot, so let's say it's forbidden to eat them even if they are edible," she declared with a radiant smile and gently patted my head.

My big sister wasn't just knowledgeable; she was also incredibly kind. That's why I was glad to be her younger sister. Nearby, there was another pair of sisters like us, with the elder one teaching the younger something, but my sister was definitely the best. And definitely the kindest.

"Okay, so clownfish are off the menu," I declared, smiling back at my sister. She pointed to the adjacent tank.

"Hazuki, there are more cute fish over there."

"Oh, really? Let's go check them out, big sister."

"Hazuki, wait! You'll get lost. Hold my hand?" she suggested, reaching out as I started moving towards the other fish.

The aquarium was dimly lit, with colors matching the inside of the tanks. It was also crowded, and I worried that if I wasn't careful, I might lose sight of my sister. So I held her hand tightly.

"This is better. It's dangerous to get lost, so let's stick together," she said with her gentle voice. Although I wanted to dash to the next tank like diving into the ocean, the aquarium wasn't a place for running, and it could be dangerous. So, I waited quietly with my sister for our parents and took the first step together.

* * *

"Cute fish, huh," I murmured, almost squeezing the platypus's beak too tightly, and gently exhaled. After pulling a tissue from its back, I exhaled again.

I hadn't intended to sharpen the hazy contours of those memories, but the past that flickered through my mind expanded on its own, and my thoughts drifted back to my childhood self. I gripped my hands tightly together.

The past doesn't matter anymore. My sister and I are not who we were back then. Our parents' attention had pivoted solely onto my sister, and somewhere along the line, the conversations between close sisters had disappeared. I tore those memories away like pages from a notebook filled with secrets. Yet fragments of those memories sometimes resurface, like today.

I cast aside these fragments, burying them beneath other memories.

"Hey, platypus," I called, addressing the platypus that Miyagi had brought into this room. I hugged it close.

This tissue cover, which Miyagi picked out when we went shopping for an electric kettle together; the cuddly companion we brought back that day. It witnessed the moment I pierced Miyagi's ears with earrings. This plush toy is filled with memories of Miyagi, and more memories will be added. The crocodile tissue cover in Miyagi's room now is also a holder of memories.That crocodile witnessed Miyagi and me during our high school years.

"The aquarium is perfect for us," I mused. While lumping platypuses and crocodiles into the same category as fish might be a bit of a stretch, they do share the common element of water, so it's not entirely unrelated.

Certainly, in my current state, choosing what Miyagi would enjoy most and finding where it could be seen in the best light is beyond me. I haven’t talked with her enough to do such a thing.

However, going to the aquarium together still has meaning. Every new memory made is a chance to learn one more thing about her.

I continued researching aquariums on my phone. Some had enchanting jellyfish tanks or offered the chance to experience feeding the animals. The idea of 'flying penguins' even came up, which seemed intriguing.

While I probably wouldn't have chosen an aquarium before, thinking about Miyagi makes me want to go to one with her. My heart is drawn to the future with Miyagi, rather than the hazy memories of my family from the past.

"Thank you," I whispered, gently kissing the platypus's beak. It had guided me to the idea of an aquarium.

Chapter 61

A Summer Vacation with Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 179

Five thousand yen for three times a week.
Last summer, I suddenly found myself being tutored by Sendai-san, who proposed this arrangement.

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Back then, she would visit almost every other day. This year, though, she's beside me every day. She greets me with a "good morning" and "good night," not because of five thousand yen or the pretext of tutoring. While she's neither family nor merely a friend, she's become a part of my daily sight, and today, she's within my view once again.

"Miyagi, how about a little break?"

It's been just over three hours since we started our binge of a foreign drama series.
The voice from beside me sounds a bit tired, or rather, a bit bored of watching the screen.

"Just one more episode."

Three hours is a long time, but we're still midway through season one, meaning there's much more ahead. The curiosity to see what happens next makes it feel too early to take a break.

"Well then, you keep watching, Miyagi."

Even though it was a series we both chose to watch together, Sendai-san irresponsibly turns over on the bed.

"Keep watching? If I do that, you won't know the storyline."
"It's fine, it's fine. I'll ask you to fill me in later."

With a casual air, Sendai-san speaks from her sprawled position on the bed.
Since it's her room, she can lounge or flit about all she wants, but when she tells me to watch alone after agreeing to watch together, it feels different.

"No, I won't tell you. Just sit properly and watch yourself."
"I'm tired."
"You're just bored."
"I'm not bored, just tired of sitting. Hey, how about a change of scenery?"

"You always want to go out, Sendai-san. We already went to the aquarium the other day; isn't that enough for now?"

We'd already fulfilled plans to go out a few days ago. Plans for a zoo visit and another aquarium trip are in the works, but those are set for autumn and still undecided.

"It's summer vacation, after all. Let's enjoy more summery things. Going out together is fun."
"No way. What's even considered ‘summery’?"

I don't know where she wants to go, but it's evening already. I can't imagine needing to go anywhere at this hour, and just because it's summer doesn't mean we have to do summery things.

"Like going to a pool or watching fireworks?"
"It's not the time for a pool and there are no fireworks today. You also mentioned wanting to go on a hot spring trip the other day, but you always say these random things. If you really want to go somewhere, think about it seriously."
"How about going out for ice cream?"
"We did that already."
"Then, how about having dinner out?"

I feel that just being in this room is enough without doing anything special for summer.

Even though I'm used to being alone, that doesn't mean I like it, and I've always hated long holidays. But now that Sendai-san is here, I don't think holidays are so bad, and it seems like there will be fun things to do.

But I don't want to go out now.

"Let's not. I'll read manga. You take a break over there, Sendai-san."

Rejecting Sendai-san's suggestion, I pause the drama still playing, grab my phone, and open an e-book. While using the bed as back support, I feel a tug on my hair from behind.

"Miyagi."

Her voice descends from above my head.
Apparently, she has given up lazing around and sat up.

"What?"

I respond without looking away from my phone.

"I'm bored."
"Want to watch more drama?"
"No."

With a weak reply, my hair gets tugged again. Not just once; she gathers it and gives a gentle pull, continuing to play with it quietly.

"What are you doing?"

I ask while scrolling through pages and get a "Braiding" in return.
It's then I realize she's pointlessly braiding my hair and unbraiding it repeatedly.

"Is it fun?"
"Quite."

I don't understand what's fun about it, but since it doesn't hinder my reading, and she seems to enjoy it, I let her be.

Though I've read this manga several times and can recall the next lines without turning pages, I keep scrolling through them.
In the small screen of my phone, the story unfolds.
Sendai-san's fingers, not just toying with my hair but occasionally brushing my ears and neck, bring a warmth that can't be felt through strands alone, a warmth that's comforting.

"Why don't you come over here, Miyagi?"

Having tired of braiding, she quietly suggests this and places a gentle kiss on the top of my head.

"I won't. You're up to something weird."
"Would you not like that, Miyagi?"
"I wouldn't."

I place my phone on the table but continue facing away from her.

"Today, wouldn't it be okay if you became confused?"

She whispers this close to my ear, prompting me to push her head away.

Bringing up what happened before isn't fair.

I suppress the urge to flee. The aquarium was unexpectedly enjoyable, so I made an effort to express my thoughts, but perhaps I overdid it, saying things best left unsaid.

"It wouldn't be."

"Then, how long should I wait?"

Sendai-san asks in a soft voice.

"Wait forever."
"Do you think I can wait that long, Miyagi?"
"Try your best to wait."
"You don't really dislike it, do you, Miyagi?"

Instead of saying she'll wait, Sendai-san throws a new question at me.

I don't want to answer.

Saying I don't mind might imply consent, while declaring I hate it might mean she'd stop touching me altogether; neither is what I want to say.

"Miyagi."

Her hand runs through my hair.
Her fingers trace behind my ear, slowly caressing my neck.

"You're annoying, Sendai-san."

I give her incessant finger a gentle swat, and without resistance, she retracts her hand, and I hear a soft "thud" from behind. Turning towards the bed, I find her lying there.

"It’s okay, I’ll wait."

With those words, she reassuringly smiles at me. However, her actions don't match her words. Her hand, just withdrawn, reaches out to touch my chin, fingers sliding down to rest above my collarbone.

"This isn’t okay."

I catch her hand before it finds its way under my t-shirt.
While she says she'll wait, it's like she's really saying she wants to do something now.

"I just want to enjoy touching you, Miyagi. I won't go further without permission."

Sendai-san might lack any sense of shame. She voices things like this without hesitation.
Last time, too, she admitted things one wouldn't normally say when I asked about how it felt.

Ordinarily, such things wouldn’t be spoken aloud.

As a result, there are times when I wonder what she might have done since then. Of course, it's a topic hard to bring up, so I've never asked, but sometimes I'm curious whether she would answer if I did.

"Stop touching me. I'm trying to read."

I firmly remove the hand resting on my collarbone.

"If I don't touch you, I'll feel cold."

Sendai-san insists on something absurd, and as she attempts to extend her hand again, I seize it and pin it against the bed with my

own, essentially sealing it there.

"You're not cold. You're hot, aren't you?"

The warmth of her hand layered on mine atop the bed is intense. Despite her preference for rooms cool enough to make me shiver, this room has recently been kept at a temperature that suits my comfort. Today, too, the temperature is just right for me, so there's no way she could be cold.

"You're right. It is hot. Pass me the remote. I'll make it cooler."
"You mean less hot, right? It's usually the latter."
"I thought I might set it to a chill that'll make you want to snuggle up to me."
"Stop saying silly things, Sendai-san, and keep quiet."

I release her hand and gently press her lips with my fingertip. It doesn't stop her from speaking, but it prompts her to momentarily fall silent.

Her lips part slightly.
When I press my finger inside, her tongue curls around it.
My finger becomes wet, and I distinctly feel her warmth.

Between the first and second knuckles.

A light bite is applied.
It's just a gentle nibble, so it doesn't hurt.
The pressure fluctuates softly, repeatedly loosening and tightening.
It's a soothing sensation—the warmth of her tongue pressing against me and the intermittent firmness of her teeth.

I slowly withdraw my finger and observe it.
The wetness on my finger brings back memories.
The day I made the first move and touched Sendai-san.
This finger was wet with something else then.

"Miyagi."

I hear her voice.
But when I don't respond, she climbs down from the bed and sits beside me.

"Let me wipe your finger."

With that, Sendai-san takes a tissue from the platypus plush's back and wipes my finger clean.

"Miyagi, you were thinking something lewd just now, weren't you?"
"I wasn't."
"Are you sure?"
"Really sure. You're the lewd one, Sendai-san."

I grab the platypus plush and give her thigh a playful swat.

A Summer Vacation with Sendai-san (II)

Part 180

It's not inherently bad to always be within arm's reach of someone.

If Sendai-san stays quiet, I don't mind if she's close enough for us to be touching. But if she has no intention of staying still, it's a different story, and so I left the room, leaving behind the one who always finds something extra to do.

I retrieved a soda and orange juice from the fridge and poured them into glasses. After taking a deep breath, I returned to the room to find Sendai-san sitting with her back against the bed.

"Since you're here, let's watch the rest of the drama."

I placed the two glasses on the table and sat next to her.

"Sure."

I expected her to complain about not getting enough rest or demand a kiss, but she simply accepted my offer and took a sip of the orange juice. Then, she clasped my hand.

Her grip was firm enough to feel warm, maybe too warm for summer, yet comforting.

I reached for the tablet to resume the drama. However, before I could touch it, my phone chimed, redirecting my reach to pick it up. On the screen was a message from Ami: "Is Sendai-san there today?"

I had a bad feeling about this.

Ami, like Maika, has been a friend since high school.

After telling Maika about my room-sharing with Sendai-san, there was no way I could keep the secret from Ami, so I told her as much as I could. Though reluctant, I knew it wouldn't feel good for them to know something I didn't, so keeping it a secret wasn't an option.

I hesitated with my response and glanced at Sendai-san.

Ami had been eager to talk to Sendai-san since learning about our living arrangement, so I could easily imagine what would happen if I answered "yes."

What should I do?

I typed "no" and then erased it.
It's best to avoid lying whenever possible. Even if I got through today, the same thing would surely come up again soon.

Resolving myself, I sent "yes" back and promptly received a new message. Several exchanges later, it became clear that Ami was with Maika, and they were both excitedly talking about Sendai-san.
Seeing the last message made me let out a big sigh.

"Something happen?"

Sendai-san squeezed my hand tightly and looked at me.

"...Is it okay if we do a video call? My friends want to talk to you."

With Ami and Maika around, Sendai-san wouldn't discuss our relationship more than necessary, so nothing strange should happen.

I knew that.
Still, I was nervous.
Ideally, I'd prefer if she said she didn't want to talk, but she rarely refused my requests.

"It's fine, but we're not talking about Utsunomiya, right?"

Sendai-san released my hand.
Predicting her guess, I replied, "Someone else," and sent Ami a message. The phone rang almost immediately, and pressing the call button, a lively voice came through.

"Is Sendai-san really there?"
"Yes, here she is."

I pointed the phone's camera at Sendai-san.

"The real deal!"

"There’s no fake, you know," she chuckled softly.

"Ah, sorry for the sudden call. I heard about you from Shiori and really wanted to talk to you. Should I introduce myself?"

Hearing the word introduction, I realized I hadn't explained Ami to Sendai-san. Yet she casually replied,

"No need. You're Shirakawa, right? Shirakawa Ami."
"Huh? Shiori told you about me?"
"Yeah, she did. And I’ve seen you with Miyagi at school many times."

Having declared this as if it were obvious, Sendai-san took the phone and graciously answered Ami's barrage of questions.

Why does she handle everything so smoothly?

She quickly befriended Maika and spoke with Ami as if they were old friends, despite never having shared a class. I can't believe this person is the same as me.

Occasionally, Maika's cheerful voice chimed in from the phone. Despite having just been all over me, Sendai-san was now conversing cheerfully with them. Meanwhile, I could only react mechanically whenever my name was called.

I had no idea how long we talked.
Maybe a few minutes, perhaps longer.
The video call ended without me realizing it, and the phone returned to my possession.

"You all get along well."

Sendai-san said in a slightly lower voice than usual.

"They're my friends."
"...And what about me?"

Though her tone barely changed, she listened seriously for an answer that was predetermined.

"We're roommates, right?"

This sentiment was what Sendai-san shared with me on our high school graduation day. Words meant to define us living together for four years until university graduation, and for now, nothing else can describe our relationship.

"And besides that?"
"Former classmates."
"And?"
"Former schoolmates."
"And?"
"Is there something you want me to say?"
"No, just felt like asking."

Brightly, as if reflecting the tone from when she spoke with Ami, she grasped my hand tight.

"Ouch, Sendai-san."

She gripped hard enough to feel as though she intended to crush my bones, and I tried to pull my hand away. Although she eased up, she didn't let go. Instead, she leaned closer and kissed my cheek as if it were her right. Her fingers traced my lips, and my phone rang briefly, but ignoring the sound, she aimed to cover my lips again. I pressed against her shoulder.

"Hold on. The phone."
"Later."

With a slightly petulant tone, she silenced me with her lips.
The kiss was brief, ending as soon as it started, but when I reached for the phone, she kissed me again.
Though there was no urgent need to look at the phone, the interruptions made me curious.

"Wait a moment."

Fully pushing her shoulder away, I grabbed the phone. A message from Ami read, "Thanks for earlier. Tell Sendai-san too," to which I quickly replied before looking at Sendai-san.

"Ami said thanks for earlier."
"Tell her it was fun."
"I'll pass that along, but why stop me from checking my phone?"
"Because I wanted to kiss Miyagi."

She answered without hesitation, her fingertips delicately caressing my lips. As soon as they withdrew, her lips ensnared mine again. This kiss lingered longer than the last, followed by one on my hand.

In moments like these, she becomes almost a different person from when she was speaking with Ami and Maika—this face of hers I wish for no one else but me to see.

"We could do that later, you know."

I freed my hand and gave her arm a soft pat.

"You didn't kiss me earlier, so it's fine now."
"Earlier... during the call with Ami?"
"Exactly."
"Sendai-san, you're such an idiot. If you did something like that, I'd be eternally asked, 'What is Sendai-san to you, Shiori?'"

"Just tell them we're roommates," she said with a smile.

It really ticked me off.

Her tone had a slight edge to it. In protest, I bit down hard on her neck.

Despite the sharpness of my teeth against her soft skin, Sendai-san didn't complain or tell me to stop. Her arms wrapped around my back, holding me so tightly that escape was impossible. With my face still buried in her neck, I pulled back, but she didn't release me.

"Sendai-san!"

As I called her name firmly, the tension in the arms around my back loosened.

"You could bite harder, if you'd like."
"That's enough."

I took a little distance from her and leaned back against the bed.

"If you're going to bite, you might as well leave marks that last all summer."

She made such a ridiculous comment without a hint of anger. No matter how hard I bite, tie her up with towels, touch any part of her, or do whatever, she never truly gets angry. She may dislike it, but she always allows me to do as I please.

She can handle anything effortlessly and could easily choose not to be with me, yet she stays by my side no matter the circumstance.

"Sendai-san, you're such a pervert."

Even if she's not a pervert, she's definitely peculiar.
No matter what, she's always kind to me.
I find myself merely consuming her kindness, unable to do anything in return.

"I think so too," she exhaled softly.

"Miyagi."
"What?"
"Keep me as your only roommate."
"As if I could live with anyone else," I replied without hesitation.
"It's a promise."

With that, she gently took hold of my pinky finger.

A Summer Vacation with Sendai-san (III)

Part 181

Today isn’t a particularly good day.

Rain is pouring and thunder seems imminent, yet Sendai-san isn't around because of her part-time job. I wish she would take a day off just this once, but she's gone to her student’s house again. Both her tutoring job and students must be very important to her.

I knew that Sendai-san wouldn’t take a break, but being alone makes me want to complain about her absence.

Attempting to distract my mind, I decide to read manga, but the story doesn't sink in. Gaming doesn’t hold my attention either. In such moments, I find myself worrying whether the weather would worsen even further.

Although it's about time for Sendai-san to return, there’s still no sign of her voice announcing, "I'm home."

I pick up the black cat plush from the bookshelf and lay down on the bed.
All these distractions, the bad weather—it’s all Sendai-san’s fault.
I stroke the cat's back and place it on my chest.

Even after several days, Sendai-san’s words, “What about me?” linger in my mind.

The day I spoke with Ami and the others, Sendai-san yearned for words from me beyond just being roommates. But all I could offer were those words and a few that touched on our past.

Sendai-san and I were people whose paths weren’t meant to cross.

Even though we shared the same classroom, it felt like a boundary separated her group and me, never getting too close. Our relationship began and ended as just classmates by chance, yet here we are tangled together with “roommates” as our binding word.

Even so, Sendai-san wished for me to express something new.

Her presence has found a place within me that can no longer be erased. She marks my calendar without asking and tries to change me into something I am not.

Perhaps there's a better word than "roommate" for us, but I don't know it yet, nor do I want to.

I wish to remain roommates.
Even after graduating college, always.
If only this time could continue forever.

If replacing 'roommate' with another word doesn't fit us well, everything might fall apart.

I pet the black cat's head, kiss its nose, then lay it beside my pillow. As I close my eyes, ominous noises, possibly from the storm outside, make me tense. I don't want to listen but I strain to hear. Yet, no sound resembling thunder reaches my ears.

When I finally exhale and sit up, a sound from outside the door prompts me to exit the room and there, my gaze meets Sendai-san's.

"I'm home."

Sendai-san, who was just about to enter her own room, says softly.

"Welcome back. Your hair is wet. Was the rain bad?"

Before she can vanish into her room, I grab her arm, feeling her damp body beneath my grip, realizing it's not just her hair but her whole body that's wet.

"The rain wasn't too bad, but the wind was strong."

Her disheveled hair, as if to affirm her words, stood untamed, perhaps emphasized because she hadn't braided it. What I thought was thunder might have just been the howling wind.

"Miyagi, have you eaten?"
"I haven't."
"I'll just change real quick, wait a bit, we'll eat together."
"Why don't you bathe first? Dinner can wait."

Though not drenched enough to drip water everywhere, being wet isn't ideal.

“I’m hungry, bathing can wait.”
“If you stay wet, you might catch a cold.”

Last summer, Sendai-san once arrived drenched to my home. Though not in her uniform today, she's wearing a blouse, creating an uncanny resemblance to that day from the past.

Back then she didn’t fall ill, but today she might. That's why she should bathe and change quickly. If she insists on staying like this, I might need to undress her just like that time.

No, I didn’t completely undress her back then.
But today, who knows.
So please, just go take a bath.

“I’ll dry my hair and change clothes, it’s fine.”
“Go take a bath.”
“It’s not that urgent; I’m not soaked.”

Sendai-san smiles, raising the corners of her mouth as if to reassure me.
I tighten my grip slightly, calling her name more firmly. She peels my hand from her arm and leans on the door.

“What? Planning to undress me here if I don’t bathe now? Like that time?”

Seems like she remembered the same incident as me.

“What if I said yes?”
“Well, maybe I'll strip Miyagi too then.”

Sendai-san tugs on the hem of my T-shirt, exposing a bit of my side as if to say my actions would determine her next move. Whether she’s serious, though, is unpredictable.

I don’t want to be stripped, yet I find myself wanting to unbutton her blouse this time, and further, remove the blouse and her bra—.

No, this isn’t right.

Lately, we've strayed too far from what roommates should typically engage in.

“I’m not going to strip you.”

It’s unnecessary. I know, yet my hands move involuntarily, unfastening one button on Sendai-san’s blouse.

“...But I will leave a mark.”

With that, I undo another button.

“Where?”

Ignoring her question, I unfasten two more buttons, opening her shirt just enough to expose her undergarments.

“Miyagi, do you call this not stripping?”
“Just three buttons, it’s not stripping.”

What I’m about to do isn’t appropriate for roommates. But it’s too late. If I want this time to last forever, we shouldn’t step outside the bounds of being roommates, yet Sendai-san has already expanded that boundary, and this is what we’ve been doing all along. Moreover, we've already committed much more inappropriate actions.

“Marks can be made without needing to unbutton.”
“Would it be okay if they’re visible?”

“I didn’t say it was okay.”

She doesn’t refuse leaving marks, though.
Thus, I press my lips against the now exposed skin.

Sendai-san pulls lightly at my hair, though not hard enough to stop me from leaving a mark.
Neither denying nor affirming, I suck on the delicate skin deeply, and upon slowly drawing back, a red mark blooms against her fair complexion.

“Honestly Miyagi, you’re always quick to do things like this.”

Sendai-san murmurs, caressing the mark I’ve just left.

"Remember when you said it was okay for me to bite hard enough to leave marks that last all summer vacation? This is pretty similar, and I made sure it was in a place your students won't see when you go to work."

"I appreciate the thoughtfulness, but it'll probably fade by the next time I work."

"If it fades, I'll just give you another."

I remove her hand from the crimson mark she’s touching and button up her blouse all the way to the top.

"But even if you say you'll give me another, thanks to your consideration, it’s not visible without checking like this. You probably won't even notice."

"Just let me know when it fades."

"Why don’t you check yourself?"

"It's a self-reporting system."

"Alright then, it's gone."

She grins mischievously as she says this, fixing her gaze on me with a teasing glint. Annoyed, I give her foot a playful kick.

"No way it’s gone that quickly."

"Why don’t you check?"

Sendai-san undoes one of the freshly buttoned buttons and grabs hold of my arm.

She mentioned that I quickly resort to doing such things, but those words suit her more. She often teases me, trying to blur the definition of the word "roommate."

I take back my arm from her grasp.

"Even without checking, I know it hasn't disappeared. So, either take a bath or change quickly. I don't want you catching a cold."

"Okay, okay. I'll go change."

Sendai-san speaks in a voice lighter than the black cat plushie as she opens the door to her room.

Chapter 62

Summer Break with Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 182

Swaying on the train bound for home, I let out a sigh.

Miyagi mentioned she had plans with friends today and had left before I even went to work at my part-time job.

It's not like she has to be at home, or that she can't hang out with friends. I mean, I have work today and don't plan to be home, and I too sometimes go out when friends invite me. However, when Miyagi isn't around, things just seem dull, and I find myself wondering who this friend is.

Who could it possibly be?

Utsunomiya is back in her hometown and hasn’t returned yet. I know that Miyagi has other friends besides Utsunomiya, but I've never heard of anyone she's close enough with to go out during summer vacation.

Today is my birthday, yet here I am.

I glance out the window. I received a last-minute “Happy Birthday” message around midnight, which is what reminded me of my own birthday; it’s not something I particularly care about. It’s not like the date of my birth holds any special meaning, and I don't expect Miyagi to celebrate it either. She probably doesn’t even remember my birthday. Still, thinking that Miyagi is out with someone else on this day sends an endless wave of gloom over me.

Birthdays aren't really a great thing, are they?

With a deep breath, I disembark from the train. While under the streetlights, I begin walking home.

Miyagi had said she would have dinner with me when she left, so I assume she should be back home by now. Even though I'll see her soon, I'm worried I might ask her something mundane like "What kind of friend is it?" and end up feeling unsatisfied. I'm irritated that of all days, she chose today to hang out with a friend. Even though I know it's unreasonable, I want to complain a hundred times over.

On days like these, petting Mike-chan the cat could make me feel better, but wouldn't you know it; Mike-chan is nowhere to be found today. Well, now that I think about it, it's rare to see Mike-chan wandering around at this hour anyway.

Walking up the stairs to the third floor, I open the door to find Miyagi's shoes by the entrance. Looks like she made it back.

After taking off my shoes and heading towards the shared space, I find Miyagi wandering restlessly around the dining kitchen.

"I'm home. What are you doing?"

I call out to Miyagi, who stands halted in front of the refrigerator.

"Welcome back. Nothing really."

"I'm asking because you're hanging out here doing nothing."

Miyagi doesn't hang around the shared space without a reason. She's not cooking, nor is she taking anything out of the fridge; her presence there is unusual in itself.

"It's really nothing, so why don't you just go to the room?"

Just as Miyagi finishes speaking, the doorbell rings, cutting her off. Instinctively, I look at the intercom monitor.

"Someone's here."

"I'll get it, so you go stay in the room."

"It's okay, I'll get it."

"No, I'll go. You stay in the room."

Miyagi approaches in a rush and gently pushes my shoulder,

ushering me towards her room, pushing me inside.

"Wha—hey, wait..."

I wasn't ready for this.

When she said "the room," I assumed she meant my own room, but suddenly being thrust into Miyagi's room was completely unexpected.

"Sit tight and wait for me."

"Sit tight? Miyagi!"

I called out to the owner of the room, but Miyagi closed the door with force and left.

"Isn't this too rough?"

It's my first time in Miyagi's room since moving in, and the whole setup was way too haphazard. I wasn't looking for special treatment, but being unceremoniously flung in here doesn't feel quite right. I really would have appreciated at least a moment to put my feelings in order before entering for the first time. It's so slapdash that I'm more surprised than anything.

Well, maybe this is just like us.

Rather than formally inviting me in, it's more like us to just somehow end up in the room like this.

I pace around the room, eventually stopping in front of the bookshelf.

The room's ambiance hasn't changed much from our high school days, except that the bookshelf is now slightly smaller, housing a black cat plushie. Miyagi had mentioned bringing the black cat along when we returned from the aquarium, and seeing it with my own eyes, I couldn't help but smile at the realization that the story was indeed true.

I pick up the black cat, giving it a pat on the head. It's been a while since I last felt its texture, but it still feels nice to touch.

"I'm happy for you."

I murmur to the plushie, likely adored by a Miyagi who resembles it in some way, and plant a kiss on its nose. After giving it another gentle pat, I return the plush to its spot as I hear the door open.

"Why are you standing? I told you to sit."

"Sorry. I was looking at the black cat."

"Sit over here."

Miyagi points to a spot opposite the bed and places two glasses of orange juice on the table.

"Juice? What about dinner?"

I ask, sitting in the indicated spot.

"We're eating here today. I'll bring it in now."

"Here?"

It’s unusual.

Miyagi, who never let me in this room before, suddenly inviting me here for a meal isn't normal. It seems like she hit her head or has been brainwashed.

"Do you not like it?"

She asks in an irritable tone, staring straight at me.

"No, it’s fine."

"If it’s fine, then stay put and enjoy."

She responds curtly, making me squirm with unease. With everything that's happening, I pull Miyagi back just before she leaves the room.

"Oh, Miyagi. Would you like to have a cookie later?"

"Cookie?"

"From Kikyo-chan as a birthday present."

Hanamaki Kikyo, one of my tutoring students, with whom I've become close enough to call by her first name, had prepared handmade cookies as a birthday gift.

"...No thanks. It's a present for you, so you should enjoy it."

Miyagi states coldly and exits the room, but she quickly returns with a large pizza and chicken nuggets, placing them on the small table before sitting across from me.

"...Why pizza?"

The question bubbles over from my mind to my lips.

"You mentioned it just now."

"What did I say?"

"Birthday."

"Birthday?"

"It's your birthday, isn't it? So, I ordered pizza."

"Eh—what?"

Miyagi says something I never expected, leaving me speechless.

"...Happy birthday."

Miyagi mumbles, and I find myself also responding absentmindedly.

"...Thank you."

The room suddenly falls silent, and after a moment, both of us murmur a quiet "Let's eat" before reaching for the pizza.

Why, why exactly?

Why did Miyagi prepare pizza for my birthday and wish me a happy birthday?

I have no idea what's going on.

I had mentioned my birthday to her before, so it's not surprising that she'd do something like this. Yet, for Miyagi to surprise me by celebrating my birthday like this, it makes everything feel unbelievable and leaves me truly flustered. I don’t know what kind of face I should make; I’m happy, but I just can't smile.

I take a bite of the pizza, generously topped with cheese. It's delicious—or at least it feels like it should be. With so many unexpected things happening all at once, I can't quite discern the taste.

"There’s cake, too."

Miyagi says something else that was completely off my radar. The summer version of Miyagi isn’t just benevolent; it’s like she’s on something that makes her overly kind.

"You bought it?"

With everything happening in quick succession, my mind and emotions are all over the place, leading me to ask what should have been an obvious question.

"It’s your birthday."

"...So when you went out earlier, it was to buy the cake?"

"...That’s right."

"You could have just said so."

"I didn’t want to say."

"Why not?"

"I just wanted to keep it a surprise. But then, you didn’t leave the house, and your job started late in the afternoon."

Miyagi bites into her pizza, sounding a bit accusatory.

"So, the whole friend thing was just a cover?"

"I just needed a reason to leave, so I said I was meeting a friend. I went by myself."

Relieved to learn she wasn't actually out with some unknown friend, I feel at ease.

"...You went to all that trouble just for me?"

"...Isn't it normal to celebrate a roommate's birthday?"

"Yeah, but I'm surprised."

"We're roommates, so it's not strange."

"Aren't you mentioning 'roommate' a bit too much?"

I understand why Miyagi needs to use the term "roommate," but when she emphasizes it so much, it makes the part of me that wants to move past just being roommates peek through.

"Stop worrying about that and eat."

Miyagi says in her usual flat tone, picking up another slice of pizza and biting into it. Her expression is still close to displeasure; she doesn't smile.

I'm not a penguin, and maybe I'm not as entertaining for Miyagi as she might like, but since she's going through the trouble of celebrating my birthday, I wish she'd show a softer expression.

"I'll eat, but if possible, I'd like to see a bit of a happier face."

I voice this small request, and Miyagi knits her brows.

"Impossible. If I could do that on command, I would've already."

"Yeah, true."

I observe Miyagi, who remains as devoid of charm as ever. In moments like this, a smiling Miyagi wishing me a happy birthday would seem out of character, so this might just be perfectly fitting. Remembering my birthday, ordering pizza, buying a cake, and celebrating it for me is already more than I could have asked for.

There will be many more birthdays to come.

It's okay to save some fun for later.

With a gaze full of admiration at Miyagi’s unsmiling face, I take another bite of the pizza.

Summer Break with Miyagi (II)

Part 183

"I'm bringing cake and tea."

Miyagi, having finished her pizza and chicken nuggets, stood up and left me alone in the room.

As I glanced around the room, I noticed that the bed opposite me was now a pipe bed, unlike in our high school days. The bedding was different too. Other things had also found their way here since then, yet it still felt like Miyagi's room, filled with familiar items like the crocodile tissue cover, which had moved with her. Even though it was my first time here, it felt comfortable and right.

I'd be happy if she keeps letting me into her room like this, but with Miyagi's penchant for the unexpected, I can't predict what the future holds.

Even today, I hadn't expected her to celebrate my birthday.

I pulled the crocodile, a friend of the black cat, closer to me.

As I patted its head with a gentle touch, I heard a voice from outside the room. "Sendai-san, could you open the door?" I did as she asked, and Miyagi entered, carrying a tray. She placed the cake and tea on the table.

"Is this, a rare cheesecake?"

On the plate was a neatly sliced piece of cake. Its precise isosceles triangle shape made it clear Miyagi hadn't cut it from a whole cake.

"Yes. You like it, right?"

Miyagi, sitting across from me, sounded slightly anxious, so I quickly answered, "Yeah."

She probably remembered the time I treated myself to a rare cheesecake as a reward after exams, which made me happy.

It was a small gesture, yet it meant so much.

The truth is, I bought the cheesecake thinking Miyagi liked it. I didn't have a particular preference for cheesecake. If it were between a shortcake and a strawberry tart, I'd choose shortcake, but when it came to cheesecake, I didn't mind whether it was rare or baked.

But because Miyagi bought this rare cheesecake thinking I enjoyed it, I suddenly found myself favoring it more in this moment.

"Can I eat?"

I asked Miyagi, fork in hand.

"You don't need to ask, just eat."

Responding to her nonchalant voice with a "Let's eat", I took a bite of the rare cheesecake.

The tartness of the lemon mixed with the smooth cream cheese spread in my mouth. The crunchy cookie base paired perfectly with the not-too-sweet cream.

"It's delicious. Thank you."

Miyagi furrowed her brow slightly, looking a bit troubled but said nothing.

Halfway through my cake, I looked at her. Finally, she uttered a small "Let's eat" and began to eat her piece of rare cheesecake.

Knowing it was a cake Miyagi chose made me reluctant to finish it. This small piece was a testament to her remembering and going out of her way to get something she thought I liked.

Gradually, I want to become embedded in Miyagi's memories, claiming more space in her mind. I want her to think only of me.

I also want to know more about her than anyone else.

"Don't you eat whole cakes on your birthday, Miyagi? The round ones."

I ventured to ask what wasn't an odd question to ask now.

"I don't really like round cakes."

"Why? Birthdays and round cakes just seem to go together."

"Not great memories," she mumbled, eating another bite of cake.

She didn't look particularly cheerful or upset.

Miyagi rarely talks about herself, and even when asked, she often doesn't give clear answers. I'm curious why she doesn't like whole cakes.

"Can I ask about that?"

Using a soft and gentle voice, I tried asking. Miyagi looked at me, then dropped her gaze to the cake. She poked at it with her fork, hesitating to speak of an unpleasant memory.

If you don't want to talk about it, that's okay.

Just as I was about to say that, Miyagi began speaking quietly.

"…When I was a child, my father would buy a round cake for my birthday, but he was always too busy with work to come home, so I ended up eating it alone."

She paused there, took a bite of cake, and sipped her tea. With a small sigh, she pushed the words stuck in her throat out into the open.

"You can't finish a whole cake by yourself, right? So, more than half of it would be left and put in the fridge. Seeing it there the next day just felt lonely, which is why I don't like them."

Miyagi sipped her tea as if she had never shared this story with anyone.

The memories from our high school days surfaced.

Even during after-school hours, summer, or winter breaks, I never met anyone at Miyagi's home. It pained her to see the leftover cake

in the fridge because she had always been alone.

But it’s different now.

"For your birthday, I’ll get a whole cake."

"…What is that? Torment?"

Miyagi looked up at me, incredulous.

"No. Let’s eat a whole cake together. A smaller cake should be easy for us to finish together."

"…Are you going to stay here on my birthday?"

Miyagi, with a disbelieving look, asked, and I firmly stated.

"I will. Isn’t it obvious?"

"What if something comes up? Like a part-time shift running late or friends calling you unexpectedly?"

"Well, Kikyō-chan is still in middle school, right? If I’m teaching her until midnight, her parents will get mad. Plus, even if a friend calls suddenly, I’ll still prioritize your birthday. So, let’s eat a round cake together on your birthday."

Smiling, I looked at Miyagi.

But she didn’t respond.

"I promise."

There’s no way I won’t be at this house on Miyagi's birthday.

While the future is uncertain, I won’t make a lie of this promise.

So, to ensure this promise, I reached for Miyagi's ear, aiming to touch her earring, but she flinched, pulling away from my hand.

"…I don’t like promises because they might get broken, so it’s okay not to make them."

Miyagi said to me.

Pledging on the earring meant I wouldn’t break my promises.

This was something Miyagi understood. We’ve promised many times, and earning her trust was part of the process. Yet, right now, Miyagi seemed afraid of making any promises with me.

I gazed intently at Miyagi.

If I let her go now, I’ll surely regret it.

"It's okay. Whether I swear on the earring or not, I won’t break my promise. We’ll have cake together on your birthday."

This felt like a promise I had to keep, no matter how much Miyagi might dislike it or what circumstances might arise.

"…Really?"

Her small voice sounded like she wanted to believe in me.

"Really. I'll choose a delicious cake so we can enjoy it together."

I didn't know how else to make her believe me, but I responded to Miyagi with the gentlest voice I could muster and asked, "Is it okay if I sit next to you?"

"You never usually ask for that," she mumbled, dropping her gaze.

"I thought it was better to ask today."

"Don’t say things that are different from usual."

Her slightly lowered voice wasn't one of objection. I moved to her side and kissed her cheek. When I tried to touch her, she shivered again, but this time I stroked her lips instead of her ear.

"Thank you for today. It made me happy. Can I kiss you here?"

"Why even ask?"

"Because it seemed like the right thing to do."

"If you ask, I'll say no."

Finally, it felt like Miyagi was back to her usual self, and I quietly pressed my lips to hers. They weren't softer than the cream of the rare cheesecake, but they felt that way.

Miyagi's hand gripped my clothing. I pulled back slightly, gave another gentle kiss, and as I stroked her cheek to kiss her again, she spoke before our lips could touch.

"As a birthday present, I didn't know what you wanted, so I thought I'd do something for you instead. Is this kiss okay for that?"

"Wait, hold on. That's not good."

Startled at such an unexpected and quickly spoken offer, I looked at Miyagi to find her cheeks tinged with a slight blush. Perhaps she was embarrassed.

"Then, what do you want?"

She pulled on my clothes, seemingly eager for a response, not giving me time to think. But under pressure, my thoughts wouldn't settle. I pondered while holding the hand pulling my clothes.

"Does that mean you'll do what I say, Miyagi?"

"As long as it's not something weird."

"Is 'weird' based on your standards, Miyagi?"

"If it were based on yours, Sendai-san, what's weird wouldn't be weird."

Miyagi said something quite insulting, gripping our joined hands tightly. In response, I squeezed back, and soon, our joined hands became relaxed again.

Holding her hand, I finally organized my thoughts and told Miyagi.

"Then, next year, celebrate my birthday too."

"Is that all you want?"

"Because next year and the year after, I'll keep asking for the same

thing, fulfilling it over and over again."

If I were to get a birthday present, I want a future like today's.

One day a year.

I want to reserve Miyagi's time.

"Even though being roommates is only for the time we're in college?"

"Birthdays can be celebrated even if we're not roommates."

"Sure, but you have lots of people who'll celebrate your birthday, Sendai-san. It doesn't have to be me."

"I want to hear 'happy birthday' from you, Miyagi."

Hearing "happy birthday" always feels good, no matter who says it.

But it's most special coming from Miyagi.

"…If you're okay with that, Sendai-san, then so am I."

Miyagi murmured, and as if to seal this as our "promise," she squeezed my hand tightly.

Having one wish fulfilled only makes me crave more.

I added a new request.

"Also, tell me more about you, Miyagi. I want to know more."

"You already asked for one thing."

"You didn't say one thing instead of a present, so I'll listen to a second one too."

"That's unfair."

"Come on, it's not difficult."

"It might not be difficult, but what should I tell you?"

Miyagi sounded as though she was resigning herself.

"Just everyday things, like your favorite color or food. Simple stuff anyone would talk about. Maybe how you went to the aquarium and became fond of penguins."

"Is that your story, Sendai-san?"

"Yeah. The aquarium was fun. I grew to like penguins, and I kind of wish I'd bought a stuffed one. I want to have more conversations like that with you. Bit by bit. It's easy."

We've spent so much time together, yet we've talked too little.

We should indulge in these trivial conversations more.

The aquarium trip left me with great memories, and I regret not buying a plush as a memento.

Even simple stories like these, I haven't shared.

Though I want to know the deeply hidden memories that sit at the bottom of the heart, there are so many other things we should talk about.

"You'll share your stories too, Sendai-san?"

"Of course."

"Then, I'll talk."

Miyagi replied in a soft voice.

Summer Break with Miyagi (III)

Part 184

The blissful reverie ended in a heartbeat, with the dawn revealing that my birthday had quietly slipped away.

In bed, I stretched my arms toward the ceiling, wishing that the happiness of today, tomorrow, and the days after could extend forever. Perhaps it was precisely because birthdays come but once a year that Miyagi celebrated it with such care.

Surely, she had pushed herself a bit.

It's hard to imagine Miyagi going out of her way for me, ordering pizza, preparing cake, and even making promises for the future.

Though I wish she wouldn’t overexert herself, in a way, I’m glad I became someone worth that effort.

With a wide yawn, I climbed out of bed and sat on the floor.

I picked up the small paper bag from Kikyō-chan, a birthday gift, and opened it. Inside were cookies, lovingly described as homemade but looking as perfectly wrapped as those you’d find in a shop. Reluctantly, I untied the ribbon and took a bite of one.

“Delicious.”

After indulging in pizza and cake yesterday, I hadn't had room for anything else. Though irregularly shaped, these cookies tasted better than any I’d received before. I reached for another, savoring it.

Back when I was in my third year of junior high like Kikyō-chan, I spent all my time studying. If I’d had the leisure to bake then, perhaps I might have grown into the person my parents hoped for. But if that were the case, I never would have met Miyagi.

Realizing it was by being my busy, non-cookie baking self that led to Miyagi celebrating my birthday with me, I find some meaning in my past self.

Now, I can bake whenever I wish. It wouldn't be so bad to bake cookies with Miyagi.

"She'd probably say no," I mused, picturing her knitted brows and smiling wryly. Just then, my stomach growled. I decided it was time to wash up and prepare breakfast, so I stood and approached the door. As I opened it, a small sound drew my attention outside to a bag hanging from the doorknob.

I took it back into my room and peered inside.

Inside the bag was a flat, wrapped object and a card. When I inspected the card first upon returning to the room, I found a print illustration of a cat with the words "HAPPY BIRTHDAY."

"A birthday card?"

Miyagi had mentioned yesterday that she hadn't prepared a birthday gift.

For a moment, I entertained the possibility of it being from someone other than Miyagi, but then remembered I was at home. It would be unsettling to find a gift from anyone else in my house. So, logically, this bag contained Miyagi's birthday present to me, and I removed the wrapped item.

Carefully peeling away the wrapping paper, I revealed a thin box, within which sat five little cats.

"Chopstick rests, I think."

A calico, a black cat, a white cat, an orange tabby, and a tuxedo cat. These cat-shaped chopstick rests were so adorable, they'd serve as nice decorations too.

It would have been nice if she'd handed them to me yesterday.

If I'd received these chopstick rests yesterday, I might not have gotten the two wishes Miyagi made come true for me, as a stand-in birthday gift. Even so, I would have liked to receive them directly from her.

Even if she seemed grumpy, even if she were curt, receiving them

from her hands directly would let me hug her, kiss her, and maybe even—.

Well, not that she'd let me.

I carefully raised the calico and black cat from among the five in my palm.

"Maybe I should wash some rice."

I'd planned on having toast for breakfast, but now switched to a menu where these chopstick rests could be used. I left my room with the cats in hand, placing them on the communal table. After washing my face and dressing, I rinsed rice and set the cooker.

It was a bit early to start preparing side dishes, so I settled in a chair, watching the pair of cats as Miyagi's door opened. She emerged in sweats, greeting me with a "Morning," to which I replied in kind.

"Thank you for the chopstick rests. They're my birthday present, right?"

I pointed to the cats on the table.

"You like cats, don't you, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi neither confirmed nor denied, her tone indifferent.

"I do. I love cats, which is why I'm happy about them."
"I didn't know what you'd want, so I went with something practical featuring cats."

Miyagi retreated to the washroom, her words sounding like excuses.

I could have grabbed her arm to stop her or held her, keeping her from going anywhere, but there's no way she'll stay in the washroom forever. Plus, she wouldn't leave the house in sweats. Before long, she'd return to this spot, so I waited for her with the cats.

Something practical, huh.

I did wonder why chopstick rests, but her earlier remark hinted that

she'd thoughtfully chosen it.

Apparently, a birthday is a day that entitles me to command Miyagi's time and thoughts, filling them with me.

August 23rd, often forgotten amid summer break—even by me—has transformed into something I eagerly anticipate, all thanks to Miyagi.

I can't wait for the next birthday to arrive.
I can't help but think that.

Picking up the calico and black cat figurines, I made their noses touch.

"What are you doing, Sendai-san?"

After a round of cat-induced kisses, Miyagi's voice reached my ears.

"Playing with the chopstick rests."

When I looked at Miyagi, she averted her gaze. Returning the calico and black cats to the table, I get up. Before she could dash away, I caught her arm.

"Let go."

Miyagi replied in irritation.

"I'll let go if you'll sit."

"I'm going to change, so let go."

"You can change later, but let's talk for a bit first."

"...Okay, but just a bit."

Releasing my hold at her pointed insistence, Miyagi reluctantly took a seat.

"What about the rest of the chopstick rests?"

Her unenthusiastic voice reached me as I sat across from her.

“The white, tabby, and tuxedo are for display in my room.”
“Use them.”

“Chopstick rests are good for one apiece, and I’ve set out the ones I’ll use here.”

Pointing to the two cats, Miyagi nudged the black one and raised her brows.

“That’s one too many.”
“The black cat is for you, Miyagi.”
“I gave them to you, Sendai-san.”

Miyagi’s voice was low as she pushed the black cat toward me.

I suspected having five chopstick rests was mere happenstance, rather than any intention to have us match. Still, out of five, designating one for Miyagi isn’t so bad.

“No harm, right? We’ve got five, and one can be yours.”

I placed the black cat back next to the calico, but Miyagi stayed silent about using it.

“I want you to use it, so please.”

“...Why the black cat?”

I caught her whispered question as she looked at me.

“It just seemed right for you, Miyagi.”

Miyagi neither confirmed nor complained. However, from her silence, it seemed she didn’t see herself akin to the black cat.

"If you don't like the black cat, I can choose another. What do you think?"
"This one’s fine."

With a murmur, Miyagi stood up.

“Wait. There’s something else I’d like to ask.”
“What is it?”
“Is there anything you want for your birthday?”

“No.”

I didn’t expect her to answer earnestly, but her curt reply cut through my inquiry.

“Then, tell me, do you prefer sunny-side-up or omelets?”
“Why do I have to answer that?”
“We agreed to talk about trivial stuff, remember?”

Yesterday, I promised Miyagi that we’d share conversations about mundane and trivial things. This was just the beginning of those seemingly inconsequential, yet significant talks that we’d continue to have.

“...I like both, but today, I’m in the mood for sunny-side-up. What about you, Sendai-san?”
“Sunny-side-up for me too. So, sunny-side-up eggs it is for breakfast.”

I grinned at her, and she replied in a soft voice, "I’d prefer them runny."

Chapter 63

Sendai-san Is Unlike Anyone Else (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 185

"It's strange to still be on summer break in September."

Maika says with a hint of nostalgia as we meet for the first time in a while. After spending nearly a month at her family home, she looks slightly sun-kissed and healthy.

"University students get a really long summer break, don't they?"
"Yeah, but since I mostly stayed at home, I couldn't do anything that felt like 'university student' things. Even though I'm living alone now, I hardly used this room."

Maika dramatically flops onto the floor, but there's no sense of despair. Instead, she looks as if she's basking in the sun like a seal on a beach, appearing more amused than anything. I shift my gaze from her to the table.

On the table, there are two glasses filled with barley tea and a bag of potato chips.

I pick up a glass with droplets forming on the outside and wet my throat. She had invited me over saying she had souvenirs, and the room isn't too hot or too cold, maintained at just the right comfortable temperature for me.

"Since it's still summer break, why not start doing 'university student' things now?"
"What exactly are 'university student' things?"

Maika asks, without missing a beat.

"Well, what could it be?"

It's been nearly half a year since becoming university students, but

my life hasn't changed much compared to when I was in high school, so I'm a bit puzzled by the question. Ideally, Maika should ask Sendai-san about such things. However, if she mentioned reaching out to Sendai-san, I'd be left feeling uneasy, so I keep quiet.

We continue the unproductive cycle of proposing and then dismissing what each of us think 'university student' things are.

"Shiori, what about traveling?"

When she suggests it for the umpteenth time, I reply with "Sounds tiring," prompting Maika to transform from a seal back into a human and sit up.

"Oh, Ami said you should come back during winter break."
"I told Ami the other day that I wouldn't be coming back even for winter break."

In late August, Ami had asked about my winter break plans and I told her I wouldn't be returning home. Although it's a conversation about the distant future, my plans won't change.

"She asked me to persuade you. Not coming back for New Year's either?"
"Nope, not coming back."
"Aren't your parents loud about it?"
"My family is pretty hands-off."

My father prioritizes work above all, and he's not interested enough in me to interfere. Besides, he's hardly ever home enough to meddle, so I didn't go back for summer break.

"Lucky you. I'd love to stay here during winter break, but I'll have to go back—there's New Year's money too."
"Nice, New Year's money."
"You could come back, Shiori. Ami would be happy."
"I'd like to see Ami too, but..."

Although I'm being truthful about wanting to see Ami, I can't say I feel inclined to return to an empty home.

"Everyone's going home for New Year's, so wouldn't it be boring to be here alone?"

Without directly saying "Let's go back together," Maika's voice hints at it.

"I don't think Sendai-san's going back either, so I won't be alone."

Although I haven't asked Sendai-san about her plans, I doubt she'd return home just for New Year's. Given that, I'd prefer to stay here rather than return to an empty family house.

"Sendai-san isn't going back either, huh? Come to think of it, she didn't go home during summer break, right?"
"She stayed at home, but..."
"Did you go out together?"
"We went out, but..."

It's understandable for her to be curious. If I were in Maika's position, I'd ask the same thing. However, it's a difficult question to answer. Although there's nothing shady about it, I still feel guilty.

"Where did you go?"

Maika casually asks. I understand she has no deep intentions, and it's only natural the conversation would lead there once 'going out' is mentioned.

"The aquarium."

I answer briefly and take a sip of barley tea.

"That's surprising. I thought Sendai-san would go somewhere different. Plus, the aquarium seems like a date."
"It's not a date."

It's not strange to go out with your roommate. Even if the place is an aquarium, there's nothing wrong with it. It's a place friends can go to, and roommates can go to. Maika's the odd one for suggesting it's like a date.

Although I realize I'm overthinking when talking about Sendai-san to others, we've done things that can't simply be chalked up to a typical roommate relationship, which is why I'm so sensitive about it.

"Well, the 'date' thing was just a joke. I wish I could've gone out

too."
"Want to go somewhere together?"
"Sounds great. Where should we go?—Oh, Shiori, isn't your birthday this month? Why not go out on your birthday?"
"Ah, for my birthday..."

The sudden mention of 'birthday' leaves me tongue-tied. Maika and Ami celebrated my birthday up until last year. But this year, it's not going to be the same.

"Hm? Do you have plans or something?"

Maika looks at me with curiosity. It's awkward, but I have to tell her.

"…I have plans."
"Oh, you do."
"Yeah. With Sendai-san."
"Just the two of you?"
"…Something like that."
"Aww, I wanted to go out with just you this year!"

Maika says dramatically, before smiling lightly and continuing.

"I'd say that, but it's not like we did anything big last year. I guess I'll let Sendai-san take over this year."
"Sorry."

I feel bad since I know she's being considerate of my situation. Ideally, I should invite Maika and spend my birthday with both her and Sendai-san, but it's hard to suggest that.

"It wasn't like we had made plans anyway, so no need to apologize. By the way, when's Sendai-san's birthday?"
"August."
"So it's already passed. Did you do something together for it?"
"In a way."

We did something 'birthday-like,' though it wasn't grand. I'm not sure if the birthday present I hesitantly gave was the right choice. While Sendai-san seemed pleased, she's not the kind to rudely reject a gift, so I'm still uncertain if her happiness was genuine.

In wanting to reciprocate her kindness through a birthday

celebration, I'm not convinced I succeeded.

"Shiori, seems like you really enjoyed summer break. Lucky you."
"Oh, but you went out with Ami, didn't you? Isn't that nice?"
"Yeah, but still... I wanted to have fun here too."

Maika pouts playfully, lying on the floor again like a seal on the beach.

Recalling the difference Sendai-san taught me between seals and sea lions, I continue discussing the seemingly never-ending summer break with Maika, even as September begins. Deciding to meet up again before university resumes, we have dinner together before I head home by train.

I climb up the stairs to the third floor, and when I open the door to our apartment, I notice Sendai-san's shoes at the entrance. She had said earlier that she wouldn't be going anywhere today. Though I'm unsure whether she actually stayed in, it seems she's home.

Heading to the shared space, Sendai-san emerges from her room, greeting me with, "Welcome back," to which I respond, "I'm home."

"How was Utsunomiya?"

In a rare moment of not being her usual cheerful self since summer break began, Sendai-san asks with a somewhat gloomy face.

"She was great. She got a bit of a tan, looked healthier."
"That's good to hear."
"Here, a little souvenir for you. For the two of us to share."

When I handed the souvenir from Maika to Sendai-san, she asked, "Do you want to eat it now?" Since we had just eaten and my stomach was still full, I replied, "Tomorrow's fine." Upon hearing my response, Sendai-san settled down into a chair, seemingly ready for a leisurely conversation.

"Did you have fun today?"
"Well, it was nice catching up after a while. We plan to hang out again during the break."
"When are you planning to go?"
"We haven't decided yet."
"I see."

With a soft murmur, Sendai-san began to rise from her chair. Although I didn't have anything urgent to discuss, I didn't want her to return to her room just yet, so I spoke up.

"Are you going home for winter break, Sendai-san?"
"No, I'm thinking of doing a part-time job during the break, something I can only do because it's winter."

Her response was half-expected, yet the part about the job was unexpected. I clenched my hands tightly.

"What about the tutoring?"
"It'll be separate from that."
"Are you taking on more work?"

I looked at Sendai-san, who was considering taking on another job in addition to her current tutoring gig, which I still struggled to accept.

The tutoring job makes me uneasy because her students reflect too much of my past self. Even though I know she wouldn't lead her students down the same path we took, it bothers me that she spends her time on it. I wish she would quit, even now.

There were times I thought I could accept other part-time jobs, but it seems I can't accept Sendai-san taking on any job, not just tutoring.

"That's the plan. Are you going home, Miyagi?"

Sendai-san looked at me.

"I'm not going home."
"Then why don't we go somewhere together during the winter break?"
"If you're taking more work, you won't have the time for that."
"I'm not planning to work so much that I can't go anywhere."

Sendai-san smiled warmly, and inexplicably, I found myself yearning for a kiss.

Why?
Why is Sendai-san unlike anyone else?

I don’t want her to become someone special, but no one else could ever take her place. Despite not wanting her presence to grow within me, she's already become significant, and being together makes me want to do inexplicable things that I wouldn’t do with anyone else.

I reach out and touch her lips with my hand. As I press my fingertips firmly, Sendai-san closes her eyes as if naturally expecting what comes next.

As I lean in, I feel her warmth reaching me even before our lips meet. I close my eyes to avoid confronting my feelings and bite her lips.

As Sendai-san starts to pull away, she grabs my arm. Pressing my teeth harder into her, her grip on my arm tightens too.

I don't intend to leave any marks on her lips, but I feel compelled to imprint something unmistakable on her that declares where she's been and what she's done. She isn’t mine, but I want to leave marks that everyone else can see.

I bite down firmly, long enough to almost draw blood, then release her.

"That hurt so much," she complained, rubbing her lips with a finger. After confirming there was no blood, she sighed softly.

"You can be mad."

I’m being unfair. I know she won't truly get angry with me.

"I've gotten used to Miyagi doing inexplicable things."

She spoke in an exasperated tone and stood up. But she didn't return to her room.

"Are you in a bad mood?"

She gently tugged at my bangs as she spoke.

"No, I'm not."

I was telling the truth. So, to prove it, I leaned in and kissed her lips.

Sendai-san Is Unlike Anyone Else (II)

Part 186

"I'm home" and "welcome back".
After the usual exchange in the shared space, I place a modestly sized bag on the table.

"Here's some pudding. There's a portion for you too, Sendai-san."
"From Utsunomiya?"

Sendai-san, who'd been eating dinner alone, sets her bowl aside and looks at me.

"No, I bought it."
"You did, Miyagi?"
"Is that bad?"
"It's not bad, but..."

The plans Maika and I had made to hang out during the break quickly arrived, and not even a week later, we went to a movie and had a meal together today. I bought some highly recommended pudding from a store we visited, but perhaps Sendai-san wasn't a fan of it.

"I'll put it in the fridge, so eat it when you feel like it."
"Thanks."

Usually, she'd say something like "Let's eat it together later," but today she remains silent. I get the feeling she's not in the best mood. She was her usual self this morning, but something might have happened while I was out.

I stash the pudding in the refrigerator and start heading back to my room. But before I can open the door, she calls out to me.

"Stay here."

I turn at the sound of her flat voice and ask, "Why?"

"I'm almost done eating."

I glance at the calico cat chopstick rest placed in front of her. I left it hanging on her doorknob the day after her birthday, and she uses it every day. Even so, a chopstick rest isn't a necessity; perhaps I should've gotten something else.

"Okay, call me when you're finished."

I begin to turn away with a slight hint of regret, but the chopsticks are placed with a clatter on the rest.

"I'm done. Thanks for the meal."

With that, Sendai-san starts washing the dishes. The sound of running water and clattering dishes fills the air. Amidst the mingling noises, her voice is absent. Having been asked to stay, yet being met with silence, I hesitate on whether to return to my room.

I lean against the door, fingertips brushing the doorknob. Her earlier words, "Stay here," linger in my mind. Ultimately, I call out to her from where I stand.

"If you told me to stay, then talk to me. Weren't we going to have some silly conversations?"

When I mention the promise we made on her birthday, her voice devoid of emotion reaches me.

"You said you were going to a movie. What did you see?"
"Something I figured you wouldn't watch."
"Was it good?"
"Not really. Even Maika said it was disappointing."
"I see."

Her disinterested reply frustrates me. It was Sendai-san who said she wanted to have ordinary conversations like anyone else, so she should show a bit more interest in me. If she's going to be dismissive, I don't want to talk.

"I'm heading back to my room."

I throw my voice at her back and start to walk away.

"Sorry. When I'm washing dishes, the sound of the water makes it

hard to hear. I'll be done soon, so just sit and wait for me."

Despite her saying she couldn't hear, her voice comes hurriedly. I don’t respond. When I remain silent, she turns to reassure me, "Just five more minutes," imposing a time limit.

"Fine, five minutes then."

I declare, without checking the clock, and sit in a chair, wondering how long she's been washing dishes. If I actually timed it, she'd just extend it by another minute or two.

"Sendai-san, what about the pudding?"

I call out, not sure how much time has passed.

"I'll eat it later."
"No, do you like it or not?"

We've had pudding together in the past, so I figure she doesn't dislike it.

"What about you, Miyagi?"

Sendai-san approaches, having finished washing the dishes.

"I don't buy things I don't like."
"I like pudding too."

She smiles warmly.

I don’t like it.

Not her lack of apparent interest in me, nor making me wait for five minutes, nor the way her smile tries to brush it all aside as if it never happened. I get up and grab her arm with my left hand. Pressing my right thumb to the corner of her lips, she calls my name.

"If you're going to bite, don't do it on the lips."
"I never said I was going to bite."
"You didn’t say it, but you're going to, right?"

While she’s correct, I don’t want to admit it when she assumes. I

release her arm without answering.

"Lips hurt too much, so do it somewhere else instead. I don't mind a little mark."

As she says that, Sendai-san wraps her hand around mine.

"I'm not going to do anything, let me go."
"Really?"
"Really."

I look her in the eyes and state it clearly. Yet she doesn't release my hand. Instead, she closes the distance and kisses my lips. Her lips brush mine lightly and retreat just as quickly. Then they touch again, and I give her lip a gentle bite.

"Ouch."

When I let go, she exclaims dramatically, looking at me.

"I didn't bite hard enough for it to hurt."
"It did."

Feigning drama, she rubs her lips, and I bring my face closer to her neck, pressing my teeth against her skin. This time, I bite hard enough to leave a mark.

"Miyagi, that really hurts."

Ignoring her voice, I continue pressing my teeth firmly into her neck until she grips my arm hard. Digging my teeth into her skin as if tearing into soft flesh, my lips cling to her neck, feeling the warmth. Just as I apply pressure with my jaw, her grasp on my arm tightens in sync.

When her hold on my arm becomes painful and I pull away from her neck, Sendai-san doesn't let go.

"I didn't say you could bite that hard."
"But you said it's okay to leave a mark."
"There should be a limit to that."
"If there's a limit, tell me from the start."

She exhales softly, and while releasing my arm, she caresses her

neck where my mark is. Watching her fingers trace what I've done over and over again, I feel the urge to bite her neck once more. But before I can, she begins to speak.

"Miyagi, have you enjoyed the rest of your summer break?"
"Why the sudden question?"
"Do you remember when I asked you to tell me about your fun times?"

A memory of our conversation on the way back from the aquarium flashes in my mind. I exhale softly and fulfill the promise we made.

"…It's been kind of fun."

This summer break was different from any other summer break I've had before. Previously, long breaks were times spent mostly alone, but this year, with Sendai-san around, I wasn't alone much at all. Even last summer, we met, but that wasn't more than three times a week. We weren't living together like we are now.

Though I can't imagine spending time like this with anyone else, living with someone during a long break is turning out to be not so bad.

"Then Miyagi, why don't we have a sleepover right now?"

Sendai-san suggests abruptly with a cheerful smile, yet the leap from "then" to "sleepover" makes no sense to me. Besides, a sleepover hardly seems necessary for us.

"Even though we live in the same house?"
"We do live in the same house, but not in the same room."
"True, but..."
"Let's end this summer break on a fun note. Let's talk about silly things and strengthen our bond. In your room, Miyagi."
"Wait, why my room?"

I glare at Sendai-san, who looks as if this is the most obvious thing in the world. I've let her into my room a few times since her birthday, and though that's not the issue, the thought of a sleepover changes things. Besides, I haven't even agreed to the sleepover.

"You've already stayed in my room, haven't you? It's time for you to host me."

"No way."
"Come on, let's have a sleepover."
"Sendai-san, you're definitely planning something weird, aren't you?"
"Don’t you remember when I said I would wait? I won’t do anything more than kiss until you say it’s okay."
"I don't trust you."
"I swear on the earrings."

I didn’t ask her to swear, but she reaches out and touches my ear, planting a kiss on the earring.

"I'll wait until you say it's okay."

The promise made upon my earring is meant to be kept. I understand that, but I still waver on whether to trust her restraint.

"Miyagi, if you're so worried, just stay up all night."
"Stay up?"
"If we watch some movies until morning, there won't be a need to go to bed, and nothing will happen, right?"
"…Were you planning to sleep in my bed, Sendai-san?"
"You stayed in my bed too, didn't you?"
"It's cramped. If you're staying over, bring your own futon."
"That's a hassle. We can just sleep together, or you can stay up if you don't want to sleep. So, it's settled."

Sendai-san claps her hands, signaling the end of the discussion. I glance at the door to my room. I'm not particularly sleepy at the moment. One sleepless night shouldn’t be a problem. I decide to pull an all-nighter, accepting Sendai-san's suggestion.

Sendai-san Is Unlike Anyone Else (III)

Part 187

We planned to watch movies until the break of dawn. However, Sendai-san doesn't seem keen on using the tablet she brought. After taking a bath and changing clothes, she joins me, sipping tea elegantly by my side.

"Isn't a sleepover supposed to be about watching movies together?"

I ask Sendai-san, who's wearing a T-shirt as pajamas. She places her mug down and looks at me.

"We can watch movies if you plan on pulling an all-nighter, Miyagi."
"Alright, then let's pull an all-nighter and watch some movies."
"You just watched a movie with Utsunomiya, right? Let's save it for later."
"I want to watch now."

I reach for the tablet on the table, but before I can grab it, Sendai-san snatches it away.

"Movies are for when there's nothing left to talk about. I suggested we chat about trivial matters to strengthen our bond."

With a smile, Sendai-san places the tablet on the bed propped against the headboard.

"I have nothing to talk about."
"Sure you do. Like what we'll have for breakfast tomorrow, for instance."
"Toast with butter and jam."
"Okay, then how about memorable moments from high school?"
"I don't need to answer that. This is my room, so I'll decide what we do."

I assert firmly, and though Sendai-san responds with "Oh, I see," it doesn't appear like she's willing to comply. She brightly exclaims my name.

"Miyagi, Let's have a rock-paper-scissors match."
"Huh?"

I'm taken aback by her unexpected words, unable to respond properly.

"Here we go. Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!"

Reacting instinctively to her cheer, I throw rock. I glance at Sendai-san's hand and see she played paper, her voice filled with amusement.

"I win, so movies will wait until later."

It seems the rock-paper-scissors match was to determine who decides what we do next. Having won, Sendai-san naturally starts a conversation about trivial matters.

"Miyagi, aren't you going to get a part-time job?"
"No."

If it meant not having to return to an empty house, I might consider it, but for now there's no need. My father ensures I have enough support to get through university without taking on a part-time job.

"I mentioned I plan to increase my part-time work over winter break. Would you be interested in joining me?"
"You should go by yourself, Sendai-san."

I can’t accept the idea of Sendai-san working a part-time job. I don’t want her going to places I don't know or meeting people I haven’t met, yet it doesn’t mean I want to work alongside her.

"If you're not going home, you'll have plenty of free time over winter break, right?"
"Having free time doesn't mean I'll work."
"Why not?"
"I'm not fit for it."

If I were to work alongside the effortlessly competent Sendai-san, I'd inevitably be compared to her. I'm not like her; I can't do everything flawlessly nor am I as efficient. Working at the same place would likely expose my shortcomings to her. While I’m not aiming to impress her, there's no reason to willingly show her my

inadequacies.

Moreover, when I'm with Sendai-san in the presence of others, I never know how to act.

"After graduating university, you're planning to enter the workforce, right? A part-time job would be good practice for that."
"Even as practice, I wouldn't do it with you, Sendai-san."
"...Would you do it with Utsunomiya, then?"

Her voice lowers slightly. It seems Sendai-san is in a bad mood today.

"Maika isn't involved here."
"If you're going to work, do it with me."
"I'm not working with you over winter break, or at all."

Honestly, I believe it would be better if Sendai-san didn't take on a part-time job either.

Rather than insisting I work, she should consider foregoing her own winter break job. She should quit tutoring and spend lazy days at home instead. But it seems that's not how she feels, as she exhales softly and turns her body towards me in discontent.

"I'll say it again. Over winter break, let's work a part-time job together. I'll find the job, so let's do it."
"I already said no, I'm not working with you, Sendai-san."

Being entered into a part-time job without my consent would be problematic, so I clearly refuse again. No matter how many times it's brought up, I have no intention of working together.

"Are you sure?"
"Yes, I'm sure."
"…Miyagi."

Sendai-san calls me by name in a quiet voice. When I don't respond, a hand is placed on my shoulder.

"Miyagi, you should consider my feelings a little more."
"...Didn't I buy pudding earlier today?"
"That's not what I mean. What I'm saying is—it hurts me."

Sendai-san's hand on my shoulder gradually tightens. As I feel like I might be pushed down, I push back against her shoulder, putting a little distance between us.

"What do you mean by hurt?"
"If you don't get it, never mind."

And with that, Sendai-san kisses me as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Her lips press firmly against mine, a hand wrapping around my back.

Over my T-shirt, her hand strokes my scapula, then moves downward. As her hand slips beneath my shirt, I try to push her away, but she brings her lips to mine again. This time, she deepens the kiss, and when her tongue pushes in between my lips, I lightly bite down as if to ward it off. Yet she doesn't pull away. Her tongue, foreign to me, entwines with my own.

Her hand travels upward along my spine. Before I know it, her tongue seems to meld seamlessly with my own, and within moments, she's unhooking my bra. With considerable force, I push Sendai-san away, extracting her intrusive hand from my shirt.

"This isn't the kind of mood for doing such things."

A kiss is one thing, but it shouldn't have escalated to the point of removing undergarments. Besides, she promised otherwise.

"Besides, you said you'd wait until I was ready."

That wasn't an agreement I forced her into. It was something she proposed, something she vowed before stepping into this room, even swearing by the earring.

"I didn't intend for this sleepover to be about these kinds of things... This is on you, Miyagi."
"Even if it's my fault, you made a promise, so keep it."
"I will keep it. But once you say yes, I won't need to wait anymore, right?"

Sendai-san makes it sound like the natural order of things, once again trying to slide her hand back under my shirt, so I stop her by pressing on her shoulder.

The sequence is wrong. She should ask first if it's okay.

"Miyagi, if you don't want this, just say so. I'll stop then."
"No."
"Why?"
"I told you before."
"You said it would make you feel like things are spiraling out of control, whether doing it or having it done to you, right?"

Hearing my own words from Sendai-san's mouth makes me painfully aware of how embarrassing it was to have said them. I regret having let those words escape because it was something I absolutely didn't need to admit.

"Miyagi."

When I remain silent, Sendai-san gently caresses my cheek, prompting a soft acknowledgment from me.

"Isn't it fine to lose yourself a little sometimes? Tomorrow's a free day, so relax and let go if you need to."

Her hand slips down my cheek to my neck. Sendai-san's fingertips lightly graze my clavicle, prompting me to grasp her hand firmly.

"Sendai-san, you've said similar things before, but I don't feel it's okay."

Removing the hand adhered to my body, I push it back towards her.

"Then I'll only go as far as you won't lose control."

Her voice whispers near my ear as she presses her lips against my neck. She lightly sucks and gently bites with her teeth, but it's a soft nip that doesn't hurt. Still, it tickles, causing me to momentarily lose strength.

Before I realize it, my back is against the floor.

"Sendai-san!"

I call her name forcefully, only to have my lips captured by hers. Her hand slips deftly beneath my T-shirt.

Her hand rests on my stomach, slowly moving upward. The already unhooked bra is pushed aside without hesitation. When I bite her lip, Sendai-san pulls back, retreating, but her hand remains clasped over my chest.

I hold my breath instinctively. Yet, Sendai-san does nothing further. Her hand stays perfectly still on my chest.

For now, I can keep my composure, only feeling her warmth. But if this continues—

I grab her hand over the T-shirt.

"I didn't say it was okay."
"But you don't want it, right?"
"If you understand that, then please move your hand."
"I want to respect your feelings, Miyagi, and I think I have been respecting them."

"...But you're not doing that now."
"I still want to keep going. So instead of saying it's because it'll confuse you, come up with a reason why you truly don't want to, something more substantial, something that would prevent me from doing anything at all."

Sendai-san speaks in a tone that sounds both unreasonable and yet undeniably reasonable at the same time.

"Then before I answer, you answer me first. What's your reason for wanting to do this?"

When I ask, she gazes at me intently. Her hand, which I had grasped, moves voluntarily downward, and I stop it, holding it over my stomach.

"...Are you sure you want me to answer that?"

Her voice, once confident, now sounds uncertain.

Sendai-san lowers her eyes, hesitating. She averts her gaze and the atmosphere grows heavy.

There's no reason this should be an uncomfortable moment, yet my heart feels constricted and it's hard to breathe. Like raindrops

erratically hitting the window, my heart pounds in an irregular rhythm.

I don't know what she wants to say, but it feels like something I shouldn't hear.

Her downcast eyes meet mine. As she begins to speak, I cut off her words before she can utter them.

"You don't need to answer."
"But you asked, Miyagi."
"I know, but you don't have to answer."
"Alright, I won't answer... But at least give me a proper reason for why you don't want to."

With that, Sendai-san withdraws her hand from beneath my T-shirt.

Sendai-san Is Unlike Anyone Else (IV)

Part 188

Wait until I say it's okay.

Sendai-san has yet to break the promise sworn to my earrings. She's merely on the verge of breaking it.

If I express the reason for not wanting to be with her, it would count as keeping the promise. But, unfortunately, I lack a compelling reason strong enough to render Sendai-san "unable to do anything."

Since she said, "If there's no reason, just make one up," theoretically, I could fabricate one. But creating a reason capable of stopping her is easier said than done.

"Miyagi, what's your reason?"

"...Sendai-san, you once said you don't need a reason to kiss. In that case, I shouldn't need a reason to not want to either."

Before I can think of or create a valid reason, I'm pressed to answer, causing me to utter a justification that I know won't satisfy Sendai-san.

"That kind of reason won't stop me from doing anything, you know?"

Sendai-san gently strokes my arm exposed from my T-shirt. Her soft hand glides smoothly along my skin, touching my upper arm delicately.

"Is it okay?"

Her voice is kind as she asks, but it's clear she doesn’t intend to wait for my reply as her lips press against my neck. They attach, detach, and attach again. The hand that was stroking my arm slips beneath the hem of my T-shirt before I can capture it, fingers grazing my side, and she nibbles sweetly at my neck.

This isn't good.

There's no way continuing this is right, but her hand stirs inside my T-shirt and the feel of her lips against my neck steals my thoughts. I'm unable to come up with a reason robust enough to convince her.

The hand creeping along my side settles on my chest. Not wanting my expression to be seen, I'm conflicted about pulling Sendai-san closer.

This room is way too bright.
Everything I want to keep hidden is in plain view.

Ideally, I'd prefer the lights off, but I doubt Sendai-san would turn them off for me, and I can't bring myself to do it either. If so, I would rather draw her in and disappear from her sight. But drawing her in would seem like granting permission.

The hand on my chest begins to move slowly.

Her fingers trace the outline as if to confirm its shape, softly caressing. They pause over my chest's center, and I find myself responding to the touch.

My body is reacting the same way Sendai-san's did when I touched her chest, and I know she realizes that. Yet, not wanting her to see, I capture her hand through the fabric.

The hand that grabs me presses more firmly against my chest, refusing to let go. It was as if she was telling me what was happening at the center of what she was touching, and my cheeks grew hot.

I looked away from Sendai-san.

"Stop."

I can't look at her face now.

"What's the reason?"

I have no answer to her question. She nibbles my ear. Her breaths sap the strength needed to push her away.

"If you can’t say it, just let it continue."

Her whisper at my ear weakens me. The hand I clasped escapes to freely roam over my chest. Fingers deliberately rub a place clearly reacting to her touch. Her fingers make the spot tingle as though it's charged with electricity.

I bite my lip hard.

I want to stop Sendai-san's hand, but my attention is drawn to the spot where her fingers are touching. A feeling arises that I don't want to put into words. Despite the air conditioning, the room feels hot, and my breathing turns erratic.

"Doesn't it feel good?"

Sendai-san attempts to draw out the emotions I'm trying to look away from, and I want to deny it immediately. But when I open my mouth, I fear the words will betray me, so I keep it shut.

"Tell me, Miyagi."

The hand on my chest and her whisper in my ear swirl around in my mind.

At some point, Sendai-san's hands began to easily destroy my sanity. The walls that were supposed to reject her crumbled away, letting her in. It was scary, and I desperately wanted to run away, but it felt good, and I couldn't help but pick up my crumbled sanity, as I felt like I was no longer myself. If I wasn't able to protect myself, I would be too scared to be by Sendai-san's side.

Thus, I piece back together my reason like a puzzle, restoring it to its original place, reconstructing my usual self.

I hold my breath, releasing it slowly.
Grasping Sendai-san's hand over my clothes, I meet her gaze and voice whatever fragment of reason I muster.

"...No."
"If it's a no, then give me a reason."

Our eyes meet.
Her patient, expressionless eyes fixate intently on me.

"It's too bright, everything's visible."

I glare at Sendai-san, peeling her hand off my body and pushing it outside my clothing.

"But I want to see Miyagi."
"I don't want to be seen."
"Is that your only reason?"

I'm aware it doesn't suffice as an excuse to stop her, but I can't find any other reason. As I fall silent, she grabs my hand.

"If you're embarrassed to be seen, you could just cover my eyes."

She uses my hand to cover her eyes, adding, "Now I can't see."

"This isn't what I meant."

I respond firmly, retracting my hand.
However, she tightens her grip instead of letting go, attempting to pull me back.

"Do you dislike being touched? If so, you can touch me too."

My hand is placed firmly on her chest.
The warmth through the shirt isn't enough.
I want to touch more.

Like that time when I touched Sendai-san—.

No, she's attempting to mislead me.

It's not simply about disliking being the only one touched.
We were talking about something entirely different, yet because of her antics, I find myself wanting to touch her more.

"Doesn't this make it even?"
"It's not even."
"Miyagi, if you want to touch directly, you can. I'll be touching you too."

Guided by Sendai-san, my hand finds its way inside her T-shirt, and once again, I'm close to being misled. As my hand rests under her

chest, the speed at which I repair my crumbling reason lags. The warmth in my palm feels soothing, and I wrap my hand around her back. Stroking the smooth skin and sliding my fingers upward, I encounter the bra clasp, hearing, "You can unhook it." My heart pounds as though it's doubled in size.

I unhook it and touch her skin directly.

The present and the past overlap.
How I wished then I hadn't turned off the lights.
I wanted to see her expression, to understand it.

Now I can see her face.
When I call "Sendai-san," she meets my gaze.
Her cheeks are flushed, and my name, "Miyagi," spills gently from her slightly parted lips. Sendai-san's hand touches my skin directly.

Her fingers trace my chest slowly as though exploring its texture, and her palm presses against me as if sealing its warmth. Although her hand is warm, my body feels even hotter, and a breath escapes. Her hand fits so snugly it seems it might never peel away.

Breathing became difficult, and my desire for more of Sendai-san grew stronger, prompting me to wrap my arms around her back and pull her closer. Her lips landed on my neck, gently lapping at the skin.

In a far corner of my mind, a fragment of my suppressed reason flickered. Even though I had pulled her in, I still felt the need to stop her.

I needed to quickly find a reason to halt her exploration of my body, but the heat slipping in made it elusive. My emotions were swayed by the hands that never ceased their wandering over my body.

Amidst the crumbling shreds of my reason, something emerged that I did not wish to see. It was something I had turned away from for a long time.

Deep within my heart, a part of me that no one— not even myself— could see was trying to surface.

I had always turned away from it. Making sure it was shielded from the light, returning any sprouting buds back to the soil before they

could fully bloom.

What was it?

Even coming to terms with it likely wouldn’t serve as a good enough reason to stop her. Sendai-san's hand caressed my side and moved downward. Unsure of what to do next, I called out to her.

"Is it just today?"

"What do you mean by just today?"

"Is this kind of thing something that only happens today?"

"I want to do it again and again from now on."

When I grabbed her hand, she pressed it flat against my hipbone.

"This isn't what roommates do."

If this repeats several times, I feel like I'd become unable to separate from Sendai-san, just as her hand couldn’t separate from my hip. If we ended up bonded so closely, tearing apart would surely hurt deeply. I couldn't imagine enduring that pain.

"...Do you not want to be anything more than roommates, Miyagi?"

Though I wish nothing would change, Sendai-san seems eager to transform.

Into something more than just roommates. Into something different from what we are now.

I understand remaining the same isn't possible.
But I can't match Sendai-san's pace.

"...Can we stay as roommates, for now?"

I'm finally growing comfortable in our role as roommates, changing it suddenly would be unsettling. I can't keep up with Sendai-san's speed. Sometimes I need to pause, struggle to move my feet, and can only progress so slowly that I end up wanting to give up on pursuing the ever-distant Sendai-san if she goes too fast.

The thought of Sendai-san disappearing somewhere is unbearable. That's why I wish she would slow down a bit.

"Sendai-san."

I clutch her clothes.
She exhales softly.

"Alright. For now, being roommates is fine. I'll stop here."

Sendai-san withdraws her hands from my body.
And then, she looks directly at me.

"So, Miyagi. – Praise me."

Her unsteady voice reaches me, and I instinctively caress her hair and gently stroke her head.

"...Thank you."

I doubt these are the words Sendai-san wanted to hear, yet I find no others. I run my fingers through her long, untied hair, studying her quietly.

"That doesn't really sound like praise, but it's okay."

Sendai-san spoke in her usual voice, then sat up and began adjusting her disheveled clothes. I turned my back to her, fastening the undone clasp.

"I'm heading back to my room today."

I turned toward the voice coming from behind me.

"You said it's a sleepover."

The words slipped out inadvertently, prompting a flustered response from Sendai-san.

"...Is testing my patience a hobby of yours, Miyagi?"

"That's not my intention, but you're the one who swore by the earrings, and you're the one who suggested the sleepover."

I realize I'm being a bit selfish.
But I want Sendai-san nearby.
Though terrified that everything might change if I accept everything, I'm equally scared if she chooses to leave my side.

"Sendai-san."

I tug at her T-shirt as she tries to leave the room. Still, she doesn't relent, and when I pull strongly, the fabric stretches, causing Sendai-san to plop down onto the floor.

"Miyagi. I'm not lying when I say I'll wait, but I don't think I can wait forever. I've realized that a lot of things are no good."

"Don't give up."

"It's okay, I'll sleep quietly tonight."

"Are you really going to sleep?"

"I'm going to bed now. Miyagi, you can stay awake."

With that, Sendai-san removed my hand that held her T-shirt and lay on the bed without asking permission.

"That's my bed."

"You coax me to stay, only to tell me to sleep on the floor?"

She smiled sweetly, handing over the tablet that had been on the bed, leaving me no choice but to accept it and place it on the table. I exhaled deeply, when suddenly the power to the lights cut off, and darkness enveloped the room.

"Are you still awake, Miyagi?"

"I'm going to sleep."

After nudging Sendai-san towards the wall, I turned my back to her and lay down on the bed. Closing my eyes, I felt her embrace, pressing snugly against me. My entire back became Sendai-san's, and I could feel the softness of her chest and her breathing.

A clash of comfort and discomfort.

Those contradictory feelings mingled, compelling me to complain.
Yet before I could, Sendai-san spoke softly.

"This is my reward for holding back earlier."

Her insistence was gentle, leaving me with nothing to say.
I don't know what lies ahead for us.
I only wish for this moment to last forever.

Precisely because we can't remain the same forever, for now, I want to lean into Sendai-san's kindness and keep feeling her warmth by my side.

I grasped the hand she wrapped around me.
I hope that tomorrow is a continuation of today.
I silently wished as I closed my eyes.

Chapter 64

Feelings Towards Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 189

When I opened my eyes, Miyagi's face was right in front of me.

It was Miyagi who stopped me from leaving the room to call off the sleepover last night, and it was my decision to sleep in her bed. I also distinctly remember that she turned her back on me when she fell asleep. But now, I can see Miyagi's face clearly.

I don't know when Miyagi turned towards me, but it makes me happy.

I poke her cheek.
Miyagi is fast asleep and doesn't react.
In the past, when we've slept together until morning, Miyagi was always the first to wake, so I'm a bit surprised to see her completely still.

Maybe she was tired after going out with Utsunomiya.

I gently stroke Miyagi's hair.
Yesterday, I hadn't planned on doing something like that.
I was eager, but minimally hopeful, that maybe during winter break, we could both work a part-time job together, watch a movie or drama, or perhaps play a game Miyagi likes, but those modest desires grew into an unbearable longing.

I touch Miyagi's earrings.

It's hard to say that I kept the promise I swore to uphold.
If I just look at the result, then technically, I didn't break it. But considering everything I did to reach this point, it feels like a miracle that Miyagi didn't throw me out of her room.

Well, it's a rather arduous miracle, but still a miracle.

I want to be by Miyagi's side, to sleep in the same bed.
I always feel this way, but last night it might have been easier to return to my own room.

Trying to fall calmly asleep after something like that requires some considerable effort. Feelings don’t switch off easily. Miyagi, who places such burdens on me, is cruel. Yet, I understand that her doing so is also a sign of trust. So, I managed to contain my feelings for Miyagi, changed the course of emotions, and slept as if nothing happened.

Still, waking up, I can't help but think about what happened yesterday.

The sensation of her chest.
Her body hotter than usual.
Her ragged breath.
And her hands pulling me closer.

None of it felt like she was stopping me; it was as if she was accepting all of me. If I had kept whispering, kept touching her, and let my emotions overflow, I'm sure Miyagi would have kept forgiving me just like that. But if I forced her without giving her space to think, nothing good would happen for me. Without consent, in a brightly lit room, continuing to touch Miyagi—who ran away even the first time—I bet she wouldn't be here now.

And once Miyagi was gone, finding her again wouldn’t be easy.

She surely wouldn’t go to Utsunomiya like before, and knowing that Utsunomiya and I are in contact, she’d likely disappear to a place even Utsunomiya wouldn’t know. If that happened, it would be impossible to bring her back.

Drawing out her words yesterday and listening to what she had to say wasn't a mistake. I also wanted to know what Miyagi was thinking.
I think yesterday's decision to quietly sleep beside Miyagi was the right one.

I'm convinced of that, but seeing Miyagi seemingly ready to accept me makes patience difficult. Miyagi is always vague, always just out of reach, sometimes making it all unbearably painful.

With a small sigh, I gently pull at her bangs.
Of course, Miyagi doesn't move at all.

"She really sleeps well."

—Without knowing what I'm going through.

If she wanted to stop me, she should've just used stronger words.

To keep me as a roommate.

Because she stops me with such ambiguous words, I end up desperately wanting to touch her as she sleeps.

I don't know how long "still" will last. It could go on forever or, perhaps, soon she might become something more than just a roommate. At least she's not opposed to living together as roommates. It implies she harbors some positive feelings towards me, with a possibility that these feelings might grow into something similar to mine.

I don't have the confidence to assert that Miyagi likes me, but I feel like she's thinking more about me than before.

In the hopeful undertone of that single word "still," I'm terrified that I might not be able to keep my feelings bottled up. If I thrust my feelings upon Miyagi, who said she doesn't want our relationship to change yet, she might never look at me again.

I feel that if I whispered "I love you" to a sleeping Miyagi, it might be forgiven, but knowing Miyagi, she's likely to wake up at such a moment.

Miyagi never acts as I'd expect, for better or worse.
I swallow the words from my lips and whisper something else.

"...Shiori."

This should be forgiven.
If she wakes up, she'll be just a little grumpy, but it won't lead to anything irreversible.

I stroke her black hair, gently caress her cheek, softly call her Shiori

once more, and kiss her lips.
I run my fingers along her limp arm and intertwine our fingers.

I kiss her fingertips and touch her lips again, and finally, Miyagi starts to stir. As her hand tries to escape mine, I grip it firmly. Pulling her closer by the waist, Miyagi's eyes slowly open.

"Good morning."

I greet the drowsy Miyagi.

"...Sendai-san?"

Her sleepy voice reaches my ears.
I place my finger on her lips and urge her to say the word I want to hear.

"Hazuki."
"Huh? Hazuki?"
"Yes. Say it one more time."

Though I say it gently to the sleepy Miyagi, she wakes up and quickly returns to her usual self, unwilling to cooperate with my whims.

"...Why are you facing me?"

Her whispered complaints come out, and she peels off her hand linked with mine and the hand around her waist.

"You've woken up already."

Miyagi is truly stingy.
The dream she lets me have is far too brief.
I wish she could have stayed groggy a little longer.

"Don't make me say strange things."

Under the thin blanket, Miyagi kicks my leg.

"Isn't calling someone's name strange a little rude?"
"It's not. It's hot, so get away."

When she pushes my shoulder hard, I catch her hand, which

prompts her to pull it back and bite my fingers.

It hurts.

Though she has a degree of restraint, she bites me with enough force, making me pull back slightly from her.

"Miyagi, you're so stingy. It's fine to stay close, isn't it?"
"I'm getting up."

As Miyagi tries to rise from the bed, I tug on her T-shirt.

"Why don't you laze around a little longer?"
"What about breakfast?"
"It's a pain to make. Let's just do brunch."
"No. I'm hungry; I'm making something."

I tighten my grip on her T-shirt.
It's the opposite of yesterday.
Today, it's me holding Miyagi back in the morning after she kept me from leaving the night before.

"Sendai-san, you'll stretch my T-shirt."
"If you don't want it stretched, stay in bed a little longer."
"How long are you planning to sleep?"
"Until noon."

Though there's nothing specifically planned, I just want to stay in the same bed a little longer. For now, I don't wish for much more, just to feel the warmth beside me.

"...Sendai-san, make lunch for me."

With a hint of annoyance, Miyagi lay back down on the bed.
However, I couldn't see her face—only her back was visible.

"Alright. I'll boil some water and make something for you."
"You mean you're planning to just make instant noodles for lunch, right?"
"It's simple."
"Make something proper."
"If you turn over and face me, I'll cook you something delicious."
"What do you mean by 'something delicious'?"
"Let's discuss it together."

I pulled her arm gently, and Miyagi turned to face me.

Feelings Towards Miyagi (II)

Part 190

I let out a sigh in front of the refrigerator. Before I knew it, the last day of summer vacation had arrived, and Miyagi's birthday was looming just around the corner.

What should I do about the cake?

Ideally, I'd like to make it myself, but having never baked a cake in my life, I'm not confident I could pull it off without a trial run. The only sweets I've made were chocolates for Valentine's Day to give to friends, and I never really felt the need to bake a cake for anyone before.

I understand there's no need to force myself to make a cake. Yet, I bought the necessary tools and ingredients, thinking I might give it a try. But here I am, with summer vacation almost over and I still haven't experimented.

"Trying it out is fine, but..."

The person I want to serve the cake to lives in the same house. It's not that I want to surprise Miyagi by making it secretly, so it's okay if she knows. The issue is what to do with a trial cake.

I open the fridge and look at the milk and eggs nearing their expiration date.

I don't plan to make a large cake, but it won't be a single-serving size either. It might be okay if Miyagi and I eat it together, but then I'd be serving her the trial cake, and serving the same cake on her birthday doesn't sound fun.

"I should just buy one."

What's important for Miyagi's birthday isn't a handmade cake. Regardless of what kind it is, it's about sharing a whole cake together. I must ensure that Miyagi doesn't spend her birthday alone, and that the leftover cake doesn't sit in the fridge.

With a sigh, I sit down in a chair. Even if I don't bake a cake, I still haven't decided on a gift.

I recall the cake I had on my birthday and the cat-shaped chopstick rest I received the next day.

It was clear the cake was chosen with my preferences in mind, and the cat-shaped rest was picked after careful thought. Just like Miyagi did for me, I want to ponder and trouble myself over how to celebrate her birthday.

I glance at Miyagi's room door. She mentioned she'd be catching up on leftover assignments today and hasn't stepped out except for meals since morning.

I wish she'd come out soon.

The gift decision can wait, and since I won't be baking a cake, there's nothing pressing to do today. I could use the ingredients in the fridge to bake something else, but if I'm baking, I want to do it with Miyagi.

Normally, I'd knock on her door by now, calling for her. But since she said she's got assignments, I can't really do that.

I stand up and fetch a glass from the cupboard. After pouring some barley tea and taking a sip, the door opens, as if responding to my wish, and Miyagi walks out.

"Are you done with the assignments?"

I ask as she silently opens the refrigerator and pulls out a soda. Her curt reply is, "Finished."

"What are you up to, Sendai-san?"

With a disinterested expression, she sets a glass on the table and pours the soda.

"I was thinking about what to make for dinner."

Unable to confess I was agonizing over a cake, I substitute with a safe response.

"We just had lunch."

"It's been over an hour; it hasn't been that recent."

"Yeah, but still."

The conversation is trivial, something that could go on or end right here. Proof of that, Miyagi returns the soda bottle to the fridge and, glass in hand, turns her back to me.

"What are you planning to do now, Miyagi?"

"Nothing."

Miyagi doesn't look at me. Since she's done with her assignments, I could probably just follow her back into her room. She likely wouldn't refuse. However, today there's something I want to do more than visiting her room.

"How about making cookies?"

Watching a movie or playing games is fine, but I want to do something different for a change.

"Cookies?"

"Yeah. I was thinking it'd be fun to make them together."

"No."

Miyagi turns around and plainly rejects the idea.

"Why not?"

"I don't like cookies."

"But you've eaten them with me so many times before."

Cookies aren't a must, anything we make is fine. But it's the first time I've heard she dislikes them. In fact, she can't dislike them. When Utsunomiya visited, she brought cookies for the two of us to eat, and Miyagi has served them before too.

"I just decided I don’t like them now."

Miyagi mutters, taking a gulp from her soda.

"Is it okay to ask why you suddenly dislike them?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Not many people dislike cookies, and it's rare to suddenly decide you do."

As I respond to Miyagi, I consider why she suddenly claimed to hate them. I remember eating cookies recently, the day after my birthday, which were a gift from Kikyō-chan, one of my tutoring students. Miyagi rejected eating them with me that day, sounding annoyed.

Miyagi tends to sulk when I talk about work. She has even asked me to quit before.

"There's no reason."

Her voice is low.

Her usual displeased tone. It's just an ordinary snack with no reason to dislike it.

But maybe...

On contemplating, I quickly dismiss the thought. Yet, part of me believes it's not entirely impossible.

—The feeling of jealousy I have towards Utsunomiya.

Could it be that Miyagi feels the same way? Is it possible that some part of her, the part that still wants me as just her roommate, is transforming into something else? No, perhaps that's wishful thinking.

"Why did you suddenly decide to make cookies anyway?"

Miyagi says with obvious irritation, placing her soda-filled glass on the table.

"Just felt like it."

I want to probe about her sudden aversion to cookies, but pushing too hard might drive her away. She’s already turning back toward her room. Before she can leave, I grab her hand. As my lips touch her fingertips, she steps on my foot disapprovingly.

"If it’s just a whim, there’s no need to make them."

"There’s no need, but there’s no reason not to either. Let’s bake together."

"I told you, I don't like cookies."

Miyagi pulls her hand back toward herself, glaring at me.

"I’ll eat them all if we bake them together."

"Then what’s the point of me baking cookies?"

"Well, what do you want to make, Miyagi? If there's something else you'd like, I'll make it."

If making something other than cookies means she'll join me, I'm fine with that. I keep offering her words to hold her here with me.

"It doesn’t matter what we make, just stay here. Once university starts, we won't have as much time together."

I flash her a smile and take a sip of the soda Miyagi had left on the table.

The fizz bursts in my mouth before settling in my stomach. It's cold, but I can't quite grasp the flavor. Even if it's something Miyagi likes, I'm not fond of carbonated drinks.

Despite that, I take another sip of the soda and hear a small voice.

"...How do we make them?"

"I'll look it up now."

I place the glass of soda back on the table and, to keep Miyagi from escaping, gently grasp her hand once more. Then, I reach for my

phone from the table.

Feelings Towards Miyagi (III)

Part 191

With a bowl and spatula ready, I take the butter out of the refrigerator. Handing Miyagi the flour sifter, I ask her to sift the cake flour, only to hear a disgruntled murmur in response.

"Can't we just use the cake flour as is?"
"Apparently not."

The cookie recipe I found on my phone specifies that the butter should be softened at room temperature and the cake flour should be sifted.

"Why?"
"Who knows? Maybe to make it taste better."

I reply while cracking and mixing the eggs.

"Sendai-san, you're pretty laid-back, aren't you?"
"I'll look up the reason later; for now, just go ahead and do it. You'd prefer it to be delicious, right? If it's a hassle, I can do it, so just leave it there."

The recipe doesn't explain why the flour should be sifted, but it wouldn't say so unless it was necessary. Rather than skipping steps, I'd prefer to follow the procedure as outlined.

"…Fine, I'll do it."

With a less-than-enthusiastic tone, she begins sifting the flour.

It's just the two of us in the shared space. Watching the flour fall into the bowl, I'm lost in thought.

The day after my birthday, as I ate cookies given to me by Kikyo-chan, I'd imagined baking cookies with Miyagi, and now it's a reality.

The long summer vacation has been filled with nothing but positive

experiences, making me feel like I've borrowed good fortune from next year to have so many good things happen. Despite the great day at the aquarium, I had believed there could be even more wonderful experiences, yet there's been so much fun that I'm worried for next year's self.

I don't believe that good and bad events have to be in balance, or that having good things will inexorably bring bad ones. But the streak of good fortune makes me suspect that some misfortune might strike to correct the balance due to how cold Miyagi has been until now.

"Sendai-san, stop staring and get to work."

Miyagi halts her sifting, glaring at me. Although she seems ready to voice another couple of complaints, she’s making cookies with me, which is a slight change from before.

I have no idea what tomorrow's Miyagi will be like, but even if she's in a bit of a bad mood, she should still choose to be with me like today. I hope that after the summer break, the good times will continue.

"Alright, I'm on it. Could you please sift the sugar too?"

I ask her to sift the sugar, then add the butter to the bowl to be creamed with a whisk. Though I'm uncertain why it needs creaming, I mix it thoroughly, then incorporate the sifted sugar. Like Miyagi, I’m curious about the need for creaming, but I decide to investigate later, adding the beaten eggs gradually and mixing well.

Once the batter becomes fluffy, I add the sifted flour, folding it in gently with the spatula, wrap the dough, and place it in the refrigerator.

"How long do we have to wait?"

Miyagi inquires while looking at the refrigerator.

"The recipe says thirty minutes to an hour, so thirty should be alright."
"Even thirty minutes feels long."

Her voice drops slightly, and I grasp her hand to prevent her from

retreating to her room.

"What's with this hand?"

Miyagi glances down at our linked hands.

"I thought you might head back to your room."
"I'm not, so let go."

When she shakes her hand away, I obediently release it, and she sits back down on the chair. It seems like she'll stay in the shared space while the dough is chilling.

I turn my back to Miyagi and start with the dishes. Placing the used utensils and bowls in the sink, I reach for the dish soap, and hear her call, "Sendai-san."

"What?"

Answering while washing the spatula, a reserved voice follows.

"Did you plan to make cookies today?"
"Not really, but why?"
"Because you had the ingredients."
"Pure coincidence. Cookie ingredients aren't exactly rare, you know."
"True, but…"

Miyagi's voice trails off, leaving only the sound of washing dishes to fill the shared space. At times like this, she keeps her thoughts to herself. Though I, too, often hold back my words, it seems Miyagi swallows twice as many.

"If you have something to say, you should say it."

Even though I don't expect a reply, I give it a shot.

"It's nothing."

As expected, her response is short, and she falls silent once more.

While we've come to talk about mundane things, there are still words hidden deep within our hearts that neither of us dares to voice. I, too, have unspoken words, so for now, I plan to leave it be.

I finish washing up quickly, place a chair beside Miyagi, and sit down.

"Sendai-san, why come all the way over here?"
"Because it's better to be close."

If we're going to be together, I want to be within reach. But as there's nothing in particular to discuss, we end up just sitting in silence.

The waiting time for the cookies feels excessively long. After this, there's still the task of baking the dough in the oven.

Though shorter than the dough's resting time, the oven will take about fifteen minutes. If we had made something like last summer's French toast, where there was always something to be doing, conversation might have flowed more freely.

Recalling last summer's events, I remember using French toast as an excuse to escape the urge to touch Miyagi.

"Why so quiet?"

Miyagi complains, lightly tapping my foot.

"I was reminiscing about last summer, how we made French toast together."
"…At that time, why did you suddenly go out for French toast ingredients?"

Clearly recalling last summer, she asks what I'd rather not explain.

"Well, who knows? I've forgotten."

I reply as lightly as I can, squeezing Miyagi's hand. Over a year has passed since then, and our relationship has changed. As roommates now, I can reach out whenever I like.

"Miyagi."

Though I haven't quite managed to call her Shiori, squeezing her hand while calling her by name doesn't upset or frighten her anymore. Gently pulling her hand towards me, I bring our faces

closer. While Miyagi never initiates, she now comfortably closes her eyes, expecting what's to come. I bridge the gap, brushing her lips with mine, then draw away.

Miyagi has changed.

This realization, clear only when looking back, shows she's now different from the Miyagi of those days.

It's not a negative change. If that's true, I want her evolution to continue as I wish. And I hope it happens swiftly.

Though I know patience is necessary, I can't help but wish for it. I want her to change even faster than it takes for the cookies to bake.

"Sendai-san, what's the time? Hasn't it been about thirty minutes?"

While still holding hands, Miyagi turns to me. Checking my phone, I see it's a bit early.

"Just a little longer."
"If it's just a little longer, isn't that fine?"

Saying so, Miyagi stands and opens the refrigerator. Despite my protest, she takes out the cookie dough and calls me over, "Sendai-san."

"What's next?"

Upon Miyagi's question, I suddenly remember we don't have a rolling pin.

"We need to roll out the dough... Hang on a sec."

I search on my phone for substitutes for a rolling pin, standing before the cookie dough laid on the counter.

"Miyagi, grab the jam for me."
"Jam?"
"Yeah."

With a perplexed expression, she retrieves a jar of jam from the fridge. Taking it from her, I wrap the jar in plastic wrap and use it to roll out the dough.

"Aren't these supposed to be rolled out with a rolling pin?"
"There's nothing else to use, so it's a necessary adaptation. Oh, and we also don't have cookie cutters."

What started as a planned cake has pivoted to cookies, leaving us with a few missing tools.

"…So you were serious earlier."

Miyagi mutters softly.

"Serious about what?"
"About not planning to make cookies."
"I suppose."

I decide to cut the flattened dough into squares with a knife. While they won't be the cutest cookies, the taste should remain unaffected. After scoring the dough vertically, just as I'm about to make horizontal cuts, Miyagi's hand reaches over.

"Can I have this part?"

She points to the very edge of the dough.

"Sure, but what for?"
"I want to shape it however I like."

After giving Miyagi a vertical strip of dough, I proceed with horizontal cuts. Soon, the squares are ready, and I glance at Miyagi to find her molding the cookie dough like clay, crafting something. She's rolling the dough into spheres, stacking them snowman-style, and adding what appear to be ears on top.

"Is that... a cat?"

The thought flits through my mind—watching a cat crafting a cat—but I hold the words back, knowing they might lead to trouble.

"Could be a dog."

If called a dog, it could pass as one, but it leans more toward a cat. However, the shape isn't the issue here.

"That looks like it might not bake through."

Despite Miyagi's earnest efforts, the thickly molded dough seems unlikely to cook evenly inside.

"What should I do, then?"
"Flatten it more."
"I don't want to."
"Not wanting to is fine, but it won't matter if it doesn’t bake. Hand the cat over."

When I extend my hand, she reluctantly hands over the dough cat.

"Sendai-san, you're so mean."

Her resentful tone follows as I roll the dough into a ball and divide it in two. I give one half back to her and flatten the other into a circle, shaping ears and eyes into a face. Miyagi follows suit, molding a cat face, and we place all the dough into the preheated oven to bake.

I decide to sit and wait for fifteen minutes. Meanwhile, Miyagi remains fixated on the oven, her gaze unwavering.

"Is it interesting?"
"Just average."

Her curt reply comes back. If it’s only average, she might as well turn to face me, I think.

"Miyagi."
"What?"

Still, she doesn’t look my way. Standing up, I hug Miyagi from behind.

"Don’t cling to me; it’s hot."

She lightly taps my arm wrapped around her waist.

"Come on, what’s the harm?"
"It is harmful."

She diligently pries off my hands and returns to her seat.

Well, alright then.

If the bonus moments stretch too long, it leaves me feeling anxious. Perhaps this amount is just right to mark the end of summer break. So, I sit next to Miyagi once more, just like earlier.

Feelings Towards Miyagi (IV)

Part 192

Taking every precaution, I made sure to tell Miyagi yesterday to stay home.

As I open the front door, I see Miyagi's shoes there. It seems she hasn’t gone out and is still at home, even now, as evening has approached.

I take off my shoes and head to the shared space. I was worried that if I went out to pick up the reserved cake and came back to an empty house, it would be problematic. Thankfully, that isn’t the case. Without the guest of honor, a birthday cake loses its meaning.

I put the small round cake in the fridge and knock on Miyagi’s door.

Tap, tap.

With two small knocks, Miyagi peeks out from her room.

"I'm home."
"Welcome back."
"I brought the cake."
"...You didn’t have to."

Miyagi says flatly.

"But we made a promise, remember? We'd share a whole round cake for your birthday."

A promise we made on my birthday. One of those was that we'd share and finish a whole cake we could both manage to eat on Miyagi's birthday.

Today, that promise would be fulfilled.

Even though Miyagi didn’t let me swear it on the earrings, breaking this promise was never an option for me.

I wanted to gain her trust.

Beyond just that reason, this promise carried significant weight. Breaking it would strip me of my worth. Precisely because it wasn't sworn on the earrings, I believe it's one that cannot be broken.

"I didn't think you'd actually buy it."

Her voice, smaller than the weight of my intentions, nudged me to gaze at her, only for her to avert her eyes.

Her voice was slightly low, but she didn't seem like she was in a bad mood. If anything, her expression was closer to neutral. It was as if she had left her emotions elsewhere.

I wonder what birthdays mean to Miyagi. Perhaps it's a day she doesn't want celebrated.

Such thoughts fleetingly cross my mind.

"I won't break a promise with you, Miyagi. I don't have work today, and there's no chance of sudden calls from friends."

I hold Miyagi's hand, trying to dispel her earlier suspicions. That day, it seemed like Miyagi didn't believe in today. That's why I decided I'd never break this promise.

The part-time job Miyagi worried about was never scheduled for today. Even if my friends suddenly called, I wasn't planning on going out. My phone was already on silent mode, ensuring it wouldn't make a sound.

"What's with that?"

Miyagi's hand tries to pull away, so I tighten my grip.

"You worried about what if my job didn't finish, or what if I suddenly got called out by friends, didn't you?"
"I'm not worried, and I didn't say anything about that."
"Then be happy about the cake. It's your birthday."

Miyagi's probably just scared. She's likely still caught up in the days she spent birthdays alone, and she's afraid of being left alone with a leftover round cake.

I've never seen someone so indifferent about a birthday cake, and while it makes me a bit uneasy, I assure myself that my understanding isn't wrong.

"A birthday without a cake is still a birthday."
"It's not the same. It's better for your birthday to have a cake, and you should look like you're having fun."
"...Sendai-san didn't seem to enjoy her birthday much either."

Being gazed upon by Miyagi, I recall August 23rd. That day, she had gone out saying she would meet a friend, so it wasn't fun. But that was before being pushed in her room, where finding out she would celebrate my birthday lightened my heavy heart.

"That's not true," I sharply counter Miyagi's words.

"It is... You didn't look happy."
"I was just surprised, since I didn't expect Miyagi to do anything for my birthday. I was really happy."

Out of my nineteen birthdays, it was the happiest and most joyous. If it didn't seem so, it was because Miyagi did things I thought impossible, and surprise overshadowed my joy.

But right now, my feelings aren't what matter. Miyagi's feelings are what truly count.

"Miyagi, don't you want your birthday celebrated?"
"...I don't know. No one's ever bought a round cake and suggested eating the whole thing."

Her voice seems uncertain.

"Were there times when you got gifts from friends? Did you ever have birthday parties?"
"I got gifts sometimes but... I don't like birthday parties."
"Why not?"
"I don't like the way I feel after they're over."
"Like what?"

There's a reason she dislikes them, likely the same reason she dislikes whole cakes——.

"Sendai-san, didn't you ask for my help with something today? What do you want me to do? Just tell me so I can get on with it."

Miyagi hurriedly changes the subject, as if to avoid voicing the answer.

"Oh, I wanted your help with cooking."

I relay the content of the "help" I requested before going out.

I don't mean to dredge up bad birthday memories for Miyagi. Today isn't about talking over unpleasant things, so I gently tug her hand and lead her to the kitchen.

"Cooking, as in food we're going to eat now?"
"Yes. We're not going for a full-blown party, but something like it."
"Isn't it weird for me to cook with you when it's my birthday?"
"It's memorable, even if it's weird. And it's more fun to cook together."
"I think Sendai-san's the only one having fun."

Though she sounds somewhat weary, she seems willing to help, following me obediently. I want to rewrite Miyagi's birthday memories with ours. I want her to believe that it's only natural I'm here, that next year and the years after, there'll be birthdays we spend together.

"...So what are we making?"
"Karaage."
"Sendai-san, you love karaage, don't you?"
"It's a classic, and it's tasty. And then we'll make some bite-sized pizzas with gyoza wrappers——"

While I'm not aiming for anything elaborate, I do want to create something delicious.

A whole cake and a little feast.

Nothing has to be extravagant. As long as today leaves a mark in Miyagi's memory, that's enough for me.

With that intent, I open the refrigerator to start preparing the meal.

Chapter 65

New Memories with Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 193

A round cake adorned with candles stands before me. Delving into old memories, I find a similar scene.

On a long-past birthday, though my father was away for work, my mother captured a photo that's still with me.

Candles matching my age and my smiling face.
The photo that fills in my fuzzy recollections is sealed within an album. Here, in Sendai-san's room, my mother is not there.

I wonder what kind of expression I have now.

I observe Sendai-san placing five candles on a white cake topped with strawberries. When we made dinner together, and when she brought the cake to her room, she never insisted that I look happier. Thus, surely, my face doesn't look that displeased.

"Maybe I should have bought number candles after all," she muses with a sincere voice, seeming quite pleased on the other side of the cake.

"This is fine," I reply.
"Really? Don't you want a 'nineteen' candle right in the center?"
"No need."

The five included candles are sufficient; there's no need to buy number ones.

"Alright, then. I'll light them up."

Sendai-san lights one candle after another.
Once all five are lit, the flames dance gently.

Even though I didn't make any plans for my birthday, trusting Sendai-san's promise, the idea of sharing a whole cake together seemed implausible. Even as she left, claiming she would pick up the cake she'd reserved, I remained skeptical.

The thought crept in that perhaps she wouldn't return.
That unsettling notion left me restless.

But now, the whole cake is right before me, with candles alight.

"I'm going to turn off the lights," she says brightly, reaching for the remote.

"No need to turn them off," I insist.
"Why not? I thought I could sing, too."
"No singing and no lights-off required."
"I wanted to showcase my lovely singing voice."
"That's unnecessary; I'm blowing them out now."

Her gestures are overly grandiose, so I—who no longer revels in birthday songs—feel a growing urge to open that long-unopened album. To add Sendai-san to its pages, crafting a new birthday memory.

"Go ahead," she whispers softly. I inhale deeply, wishing to blow away the old memories, then extinguish the candles.
As the flames snuff out, the scent of wax pricks my nose. Though I don't feel like crying, my vision blurs, prompting me to shut my eyes tightly before reopening them.

"Happy Birthday."
"Thank you."

Receiving her cheerful voice, I reply softly as she begins to clear the candles off the cake.

"Miyagi, how many slices do you want?"
"It's up to you."
"If we're sharing the whole thing, splitting it in two could work, but that might be too wild," she muses, debating whether to split it into four or six slices before mumbling to herself and heading out to fetch a knife.

I rub my eyes, looking at the cat-shaped chopstick rests on the

table's edge. The locations of these three cat figures have often shifted around the room, but now they seem to have found a home on the table.

Over time, like the calico and black cats that have grown familiar with observing our shared meals, the three cats seem to have settled into Sendai-san's room, which gives me a sense of relief as it proves she treasures the gift.

I lightly stroke the head of the tuxedo cat.
Unlike the plush black cat, it's hard and smooth.

I align the three cats and flip them over.

In the midst of this, Sendai-san returns, and I hastily place the chopstick rests back in their original positions.

"I've read that heating the knife helps it cut neatly, so I warmed it. Although the instructions said to keep the cake chilled, some time has passed since it was out… I hope it slices well."

She sits opposite me with a focused look, eyeing the cake, and places the chocolate message plate inscribed with "Happy Birthday" into my dish.

"That's yours, Miyagi," she says, confidently plunging the knife into the center of the cake.

"From the middle?" I ask.
"That's what it said."

Without lifting her gaze from the cake, she replies, drawing the knife from the center outwards. The process repeats four times, dividing the cake into quarters with two pieces each on our plates.

"Well, a reasonable presentation," she remarks with satisfaction.
It's not as pristine as a store-bought cake, yet much tidier than those I clumsily cut as a child.

"Let's eat."

Our voices overlap as we each dig into our portion.
The mingling fresh cream and fluffy sponge cake dissolve in my mouth, the strawberry's tartness accentuating the flavor, tempting

another bite.

“Is it good?” she asks, to which I affirm with a “Delicious,” taking a second helping and sipping iced tea.

“Good, I’m glad.”

Her gentle voice draws my attention from the cake to her, unintentionally meeting her gaze.

“What is it?” I inquire, noticing her looking at me, a smile forming on her lips.

“You seem to be having fun, Miyagi.”
“You look like you're having more fun.”
“Well, birthdays are enjoyable, aren’t they?”

She cheerfully devours the strawberries atop the cake. As her fork shaves bits off of her remaining slice, one quarter finds its way into her stomach. After finishing my piece, I snap the chocolate message plate in two and nibble on one piece.

“…Were you truly happy on your last birthday, Sendai-san?”
“Like I mentioned when I came back earlier, it was thanks to you that I had fun.”
“Honestly?”
“Honestly.”
“Did your friends also celebrate with you?”
“Well, yes. But that’s the same for you, isn’t it?”

Yesterday, Maika gave me a present with the words, “A day early, but…” Ami called, and my college friends celebrated as well. Still, I bet Sendai-san received double the birthday cheer.

“It’s the same, but… your friends from university celebrated too?”
“Yes, and also friends from high school.”
“Ibaraki-san?”
“That’s right.”
“Are you still in touch?”
“With Umina?”
“Yeah.”
“Yes, she wants to meet up in the winter.”

It's the first time I’ve heard this.

Up to now, Sendai-san hadn’t mentioned anything about it.

There’s no reason for her to tell me she’s communicating with Ibaraki-san; no obligation, either. And I have no right to comment on Sendai-san’s friendships.

Understanding that it’s only natural for friends to express the desire to meet doesn’t make the feeling akin to being thrown off a cliff into the ocean any easier.

“…You’re not going back, right?” I ask, distorting the second slice of cake with my fork.

"I'm not going back. If a bond breaks just because we can't meet, then that's all it was," Sendai-san says coolly without hesitation.

While I don't want her choosing to leave just to meet Ibaraki-san, her unwavering tone stirs a sympathetic sentiment toward Ibaraki-san.

In school, Sendai-san and Ibaraki-san seemed very close. However, as Sendai-san began visiting my house, I realized their friendship was only on the surface. While they were unquestionably friends, the depth of their friendship appeared to differ.

Sendai-san often brought magazines that Ibaraki-san loved to my room during high school, but she never read them with much interest. Now, she doesn't bother buying those magazines anymore.

"Sendai-san," I call.
"What is it?"
"You used to buy those magazines that Ibaraki-san liked in high school. Aren't you buying those kinds of magazines anymore?"
"I don't need them anymore," she replies as if it's the most natural thing.

Like slicing a cake, she seems to be capable of dividing the world around her without hesitation. Just as she separates trash efficiently, she can categorize what is necessary and what isn’t. She's not afraid to change shapes, like cutting a round cake into neat triangles.

At the aquarium, she had no qualms about cutting up the otter-faced pancake. When making cookies, she effortlessly molded the cat-shaped dough into one ball.

If necessary, she doesn’t hesitate to dismantle the present structure.

Watching her, I’m struck by an anxiety over how long I can remain in my current form, worried about the day when I might be discarded. I take a small breath and begin eating the cake.

The white cream, yellow sponge, and red strawberries are delightful.

There's no need to dwell on mundane thoughts on a once-a-year birthday. With the sweet, gentle cake, I press down the encroaching shadows.

"If you’d like to read them, I can start buying those magazines again," she offers softly.

"No need. I won't read them," I say, taking another bite of the cake.

Slowly savoring each bite, I consume half the round cake and the message plate. When I glance at Sendai-san, her plate is also devoid of cake.

The promise is fulfilled, and the cake is not destined to be stored in the fridge.
Every piece finds its way into our stomachs.

A table laden with warm dishes and an entire cake.

A birthday with nothing left uneaten is, I think, a happier one compared to those of past years.

It’s okay.

What Sendai-san divided was the cake, not me.
What vanished from the table wasn't me.

So, it’s okay.

"Miyagi, what kind of cake do you want next year?"
"Anything will do," I reply.
"Then, another whole cake like today’s," she says with a bright smile.

Trusting in such a promise feels like a stretch with a whole year ahead. Yet, I want to believe next year will be the same as this one.

"And here's your present," she says lightly, handing me a not-so-large bag from under the bed.

"Thank you."

For someone like Sendai-san, who seems to favor meticulousness in such matters, a simple bag without ribbons feels unusual.

"Open it now," she urges.

I do as told, pulling out a small box-like object from the bag. To my surprise, what I hold in my hands seems unfit as a present, and I find myself staring at Sendai-san in disbelief.

"What’s this?"
"Don’t you know?"
"I know what it is, but I don’t understand the meaning."

The object that emerged from the bag is something I recognize.

A memorable item I once bought and gave to Sendai-san.
It's impossible for me to forget.
However, it's something Sendai-san doesn’t need.

She was reluctant to use this.

"I’m giving you my ears, Miyagi," she says, her voice comforting, as I place the object from the bag onto the table.

A piercer, the same kind that made the holes in my ears.
That was Sendai-san’s birthday gift to me.

New Memories with Sendai-san (II)

Part 194

I find myself staring at the ear piercer resting on the table. With this, I can pierce Sendai-san's ears.

It's something I wanted to do back in high school, and even as a college student, I still longed to do it.

Now, the opportunity is right before me. I touch my own ear, gently tracing the earring, and glance at Sendai-san. She's always been receptive to almost everything I've suggested.

Even now, if I disliked the present and asked for something else, I believe she'd oblige. If I wished for the right to give orders instead, she'd likely grant that too. She'd probably even follow through if I asked her to lick my foot with that right.

But one of the few things Sendai-san has never permitted is piercing her ears.

I take a sip of the iced tea, slightly diluted by melted ice.

Why so suddenly? After being so adamantly against it in the past, what made her change her mind about getting her ears pierced?

"Sendai-san, you said you wouldn't get piercings, right?"
"I did say that. But I also mentioned that if there was something worth commemorating, I might consider it. Don't you remember?"
"...I remember."

The small floral earrings in my ears—when she gifted them, I asked why she wouldn't wear earrings, and Sendai-san casually overturned her past refusal with that answer.

"But is today such a commemorative day?"
"Wouldn't it qualify as one?"
"And what are we commemorating?"
"Your birthday, Miyagi."

Sendai-san states nonchalantly.

"Isn't it strange to treat my birthday like an occasion? Normally, you'd do that for your own birthday, not someone else's."

My birthday does not seem significant enough for what she's implying—a momentous enough day for Sendai-san to reconsider her stance on piercings.

"It wouldn't mean anything if it were my birthday."
"And why is that?"

The high school version of myself would have skipped the questions and simply pierced her ear. But now, I want to understand what's going on in her mind, as she gracefully revises the past. Without that understanding, I can't bring myself to reach for the ear piercer on the table.

"On your birthday, I want to make a vow with the earrings you pierce into my ears, Miyagi."

Sendai-san says softly, gazing intently at me.

"A vow? To do what?"
"To share another whole cake on this day next year. Last time, we only promised for the current year."

Next year, just like the earrings, is something I desire. I want to eat a whole cake with her again.

Yet the prospect of a vow is frightening.

A vow carries more weight than a simple promise; it binds words more firmly. It ties them to actions, solidifying them. And Sendai-san keeps her promises made with earrings. If I were to pierce her ear today, it would become an even stronger promise.

That's why I'm scared.

Should something unforeseeable happen that breaks such an unbreakable vow, leaving me alone on next year's birthday, I might lose faith in Sendai-san beyond that point.

"You don't have to make a vow."

Fearful of having my earrings tied to a vow, I can't accept what Sendai-san is offering.

"What about making a promise with these earrings?"
"If it's just a promise, there's no need to go through the trouble of getting earrings involved."

I want Sendai-san to forever remain the kind of person who wouldn’t betray me.

"I do want that. I want to leave a promise in a visible place for you, Miyagi."

Sendai-san softly insists.

"Why go that far?"
"Because that's what I want to do. Does there need to be another reason?"
"...No, that's enough."
"Then let me use these earrings to make a promise for next year. And hopefully, for birthdays beyond that too."

On the table rests an empty plate where the cake used to be, and the ear piercer. Her voice is sweeter than usual, and a sense of trapped nostalgic happiness seems ready to merge with the present.

"...I can't."
"Why not? You promised me, you'd celebrate my birthday next year and the year after, indefinitely. It's the same thing."

Her voice is gentle, like explaining to a child.

"Is it really the same?"
"It is."

Her soothing voice resonates in my ears. As I look at Sendai-san, it feels as if she’s assuring me, "It's okay." The words I held back are slowly pushed out from my throat.

"Then, if it's for a promise for next year, I guess it's okay."
"I understand."

Sendai-san smiles brightly, placing disinfectant and cotton on the

table.

"Are you really sure about this?"
"I am. You can pierce my ear wherever you like, Miyagi."

As I pick up the ear piercer, Sendai-san invites me over with a "come here." Following her guidance, I sit next to her and she hands me a pen. The steps to pierce an ear are already etched in my mind, without needing to read the ear piercer package.

Clean the ear, mark the spot with the pen, and use the ear piercer. Just those few steps would create a hole in Sendai-san's ear.

There's nothing complicated about it. In fact, my own ears were pierced easily. Yet, somehow, it feels incredibly daunting.

I put the ear piercer back on the table and reach for Sendai-san's ear, touching her earlobe as she did when I was pierced.

Creating a hole in this unblemished ear signifies altering Sendai-san’s shape, carrying profound implications. I tug gently at her soft earlobe and release it.

Like a cake changing shape from round to triangular, I feel like I’m transforming her into something slightly different from before. It’s a captivating act, yet it also makes me question whether it's right to pierce these ears. Changing her might also change a relationship I wish to keep the same.

I trace my index finger behind her earlobe.

"That tickles," Sendai-san murmurs softly, capturing my wrist.

My ears, pierced by her at my desire, are adorned with the flowers she chose, functioning as the keepers of our promise.

What I'm about to do isn't exceedingly different from what I wanted before. Through her wishes, I am the one changing her, keeping the promise. It won’t drastically alter who we are.

It’s okay. Piercing Sendai-san's ear won't change the fact that we are roommates.

"Let go."

As I urge, she releases my wrist, allowing me to pull at her earlobe gently before letting it go.

Her ear, perfectly shaped, comes into view. Once adorned with an earring, her ear won't look the same again.

I bring my lips closer, softly brushing against her earlobe. It's somewhat cold, supple, and pleasing to the touch. When I lightly graze it with my teeth, Sendai-san twitches subtly.

Though not on her ear, I've left countless marks on her body with my lips over time. But such marks don’t last long. Even if I were to bite, it wouldn't remain permanently. Hence, I craved to leave an indelible mark. Ideally, one unmistakable to any observer.

Placing the earring in her ear wouldn't be a tag declaring her as mine, but it would be a visible mark to anyone, and I'd be able to recognize it as a mark I made.

I flick my tongue lightly on the spot where the earring will soon adorn, prompting Sendai-san to tap my back.

"Miyagi, let's wrap this up."

Ignoring her, I bite her earlobe once more. Pressing my lips beneath it, I trace my fingers behind her ear.

"Miyagi, that's kind of intense."

With those words, Sendai-san grips my waist tight. Her fingertips glide along my side, tickling me, causing me to pull away as she pushes my shoulder.

"Stop messing around and hurry up with it."

Forcing the disinfectant and cotton into my hands, Sendai-san urges me to get moving. Accepting the items she practically shoves at me, I soak the cotton with disinfectant. I then wipe Sendai-san's ear with the cold cotton, mark it with a pen, and open the packaging for the ear piercer.

For something meant to leave an indelible mark on Sendai-san's body, it feels remarkably light.

—Did Sendai-san feel something similar when she pierced my ears?

"Are you ready?"

In a small voice, I ask, and she replies, "I am," as I gently position the device against her earlobe.

With just a bit of pressure, I can pierce her ear. I breathe in, then out.

It's going to be fine. It wasn't as painful as I thought, and it was surprisingly quick. I'm sure Sendai-san will feel the same.

Despite this reassurance, my hands remain frozen.

"Miyagi."

Her soft voice calls my name, and its gentle push breaks my frequent hesitations. I might not be able to move as swiftly as Sendai-san, but her call gets me moving again.

I press my fingers together firmly. My heart pounds in my chest with a sound so loud, it's almost overwhelming.

I let out a small breath.

When I squeeze the ear piercer, the sound of a sharp snap reverberates, and her ear is now adorned with an earring. I hear an internal creak, as if some part of me was shifting.

"I thought it would hurt more," Sendai-san remarks with a sigh of relief, meeting my gaze.

"Now for the other ear," I say, touching the opposite ear.

"Sure."

With a repeat of the meticulous process—disinfect, mark, and apply pressure with the piercer—a similar snap echoes as her second ear is pierced, and once again, it's as if I hear a sound from within myself.

One on the right, one on the left—a single hole in each ear. The sound of making two holes in Sendai-san's ears must have put cracks

in a sort of shell that was surrounding me.

I gaze intently at Sendai-san, now wearing the earrings that I had put on her.

With the small cracks in my shell, a refreshing breeze seems to flow through, and it feels as though I can see Sendai-san just a little more clearly than before.

New Memories with Sendai-san (III)

Part 195

"Yes. It looks great."

Sendai-san says in a cheerful voice while using a hand mirror to admire her freshly pierced ears. Although I also have earrings, they seem to suit Sendai-san more naturally.

"What do you think, Miyagi?"

Sendai-san puts down the hand mirror and looks at me.

"The earrings?"
"Yes."

The earrings on her ears are the same kind that I wore until a few months ago. It's not surprising since she used the same piercing kit that I did, and many others who used the same kit have similar earrings too.

Therefore, it's nothing special that Sendai-san has the same earrings I once wore. Although they symbolize an agreement we made for the future, their appearance is quite ordinary. Even so, I find that the earrings look exceptionally beautiful on her.

"With earrings, it seems harder to bite now."

Unable to express my true thoughts, I vocalize a minor, peripheral idea instead of the one at the forefront of my mind.

"Even if it’s harder to bite, you'll still do it, earrings or not."
"I think it’s fine if I bite them since Sendai-san's ears belong to me."

Not wanting to touch the newly pierced earrings, I gently tug on a part of her ear above the earlobe and let go.

"When I said you could have my ears, that's not what I meant. You know that. Besides, that's not what I wanted to talk about."

With a quiet voice, Sendai-san touches my earring. Her fingertips caress the small flower and lightly press on my earlobe. She asks me to answer seriously, and I take a small breath.

"... The earrings suit you."

I answer as I exhale. Although my voice was not very loud, it seems to have reached Sendai-san, as a gentle smile spreads across her face.

"I see. That makes me happy."

The earrings suit Sendai-san remarkably well, as though they'd been there all along. Given her demeanor, it wouldn't have been strange if she had pierced them back in high school. It feels like she's finally become her true self.

"As a thank you for the compliment, take this. It's the second part of your gift."

With those words, Sendai-san pulls out a small, finer bag than the one containing the piercer and places it in front of me.

"Why two gifts?"
"Because you gave me two gifts, Miyagi. You listened to my wishes and gave a chopstick rest the next day. So I'm also giving you two presents."

She says with a cheerful grin and adds, "Open it." Inside the bag is a neatly wrapped small box. As I take it out gingerly, I see it’s a rectangular shape with a ribbon, typical of a gift.

I don’t need it.

But I doubt Sendai-san would heed my words. Ideally, I want to return it—because the shape of the box suggests its contents.

A long, rectangular box.

It won’t contain a glue stick.
Nor will it be batteries.
Most likely, it holds something I rarely use—something out of my comfort zone.

"Miyagi, hurry up and open it."

Prompted, I reluctantly untie the ribbon and unwrap the paper. Inside is an expensive-looking lip balm, and I let out a small sigh.

"No need to make that disappointed face."

Sendai-san remarks, sounding slightly disgruntled.

"It's not my thing, you know."

I dislike the sticky feeling of lip balm on my lips. I'm not fond of makeup to begin with, and Sendai-san knows that.

"I thought you'd say that. But this one, you'll want to use, Miyagi. Even if you're not into makeup, I think you'll like it."

Sendai-san smiles, recalling the times she persuaded me to wear makeup in the past.

"I doubt that."
"Not at all. It smells nice. Delicious, even."
"Like strawberries or something?"

Though uninterested in the lip balm, my curiosity about the scent leads me to remove the cap, only for Sendai-san to snatch it away.

"I'll put it on for you."
"I can smell it without you doing that, so give it back."
"That's no fun."
"It's fine being boring."
"Use it in front of me just once."
"No way."
"I'm using the chopstick rest you gave me, you know."

In an unusually plaintive tone, Sendai-san looks at me sulkily.

She's doing it on purpose.
Definitely on purpose.

She's using a grudging tone to make me comply, pretending to sulk just to get her way.

"Miyagi."

It’s my birthday today, so I shouldn’t be the one compromising.

Still, Sendai-san kept her promise of eating a whole cake with me and promised to do so again next year. She gave me the piercings I had longed for.

I exhale deeply and turn towards Sendai-san.

"Stay still."

She insists, removing the lip balm cap. She then places her hand on my cheek and presses the lip balm to my lips.

It's not unusual for me to be near Sendai-san. Being close enough to touch shoulders, or nearly touching lips, always happens.

But today, with Sendai-san too close, I don't know where to direct my gaze, so I close my eyes.

In darkness, something sticky covers my lips.
Even unseen, I feel her gaze on my lips.
Without needing to sniff hard, a sweet fruit-like scent wafts in.

"Alright, done. You look very cute."

The voice tells me to open my eyes. Sendai-san is staring intently at me, causing me to avert my gaze.

"Enough with that."
"It’s the truth."
"Sendai-san, you're noisy. Be quiet."

I slap her thigh in protest and am asked, "It smells good, right?"

"It does."

I reply tersely, touching my lips. The sweet scent transferred to my fingers when I touch the lip balm. I couldn't clearly say what kind of fruit the scent mimics, but it definitely has a nice aroma.

"Apparently, it tastes good too."

Comes her joyful voice.

"Apparently?"
"I've never used it. I researched one Miyagi might like and confirmed the smell at the shop, but not the taste. Try licking it."

Following her suggestion, I lick my lips, sensing the lip balm on my tongue and tasting a faint sweetness.

"... It’s tasty."
"Really?"
"Yeah."
"Then, a taste test."

Before I can object, Sendai-san brings her face closer. Reflexively closing my eyes, her lips, which smell of sweet fragrance attach to mine, bringing a soft, moist sensation. Despite claiming it’s a "taste test," the moist sensation doesn't just stop on my lips—it tries to enter me.

To express my protest, I grab her arm, leading our lips to part momentarily. But only for a moment—the second kiss is more forceful, with her tongue seeking entry to entwine with mine. Her tongue is sweeter than the lipstick or even the cake.

Our tongues touch, then part.
A small breath escapes.

Despite feeling like an intruder, Sendai-san dissolves into my world, becoming a part of me. The warmth flowing into me is comforting. Her lips pull away, and she licks the freshly applied lip balm from her lips.

"It was delicious," Sendai-san says with a smile.

"The lip balm's coming off," I point out.

"You’re right," she answers lightly, once again bringing her face close. I push against her shoulder.

"I'm saying the lip balm is going to come off."

"It won’t disappear just from a little kissing. Besides, there’s plenty more."

"Just because there’s more doesn’t mean you can kiss endlessly."

"You’re really stingy, Miyagi. What's wrong with kissing a lot?"

"I'm fine with being stingy. Anyway, how many times do you intend to kiss?"

"The lip balm I gave you won’t be enough at this rate," she replies with a serious face.

It's troublesome because she genuinely tries to act on things that seem like jokes. I don't dislike kissing, but more can wait for another time.

"Sendai-san, are you an idiot? We're done for today."

I push her body away forcefully. Though I expect a complaint, she quietly pulls back and leans against the bed. Then, as if remembering something, she calls my name.

"Oh right, Miyagi. In about a month, you can bite my ears again."

"Once the piercing holes have stabilized?"

"That's right."

Sendai-san says in a quiet voice, then smiles warmly.

Chapter 66

Miyagi's Gaze (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 196

After applying my makeup, I stare intently at my reflection in the mirror, focusing on my ears.

They are what I gave Miyagi for her birthday. But it was also something I desired.

Commemorative piercings that Miyagi had pierced for me on her birthday, one for the right ear and one for the left. Our high school days, where leaving a permanent mark on the body was deemed against the rules, feel so distant now.

It's been two days since I got my ears pierced.

The small adornment Miyagi helped me put on suits me far more than I had anticipated. It reinforces my strong feelings for her, and I never tire of looking at it. I touch the earring. The sensation is nearly identical to when I run my fingers over Miyagi's ear, and I let out a soft breath.

"Technically, they match, don't they?"

If I were to tell Miyagi, she might not like it, but these earrings mirror the ones she wore in the past. Although she now exclusively wears the Plumeria-shaped earrings I gifted her, my heart leaps at the thought that she once had the same pair as me.

I wonder what Miyagi did with the first pair I ever put on her ears. Are they tucked away somewhere, or did she toss them out?

I'd like to ask, but I'm scared of hearing that she discarded them, so I never bring it up. I could never dispose of these earrings. They could stay with me forever. Yet, now that my ears are pierced, I also want to try other earrings.

For instance, something Miyagi might choose.

"That would be impossible, wouldn't it?"

I let out a sigh. Just arranging an outing for the two of us is quite the ordeal, and asking her to pick out earrings is probably as challenging as training a stray cat to fetch. By the time a month has passed and I can change earrings, even after Miyagi has bitten them, it's unlikely the cat will have turned into an obedient dog. If I am to buy new earrings, I'll have to choose them myself.

Well, it's only been two days since I got my piercings.

There's no need to rush buying new ones. For now, I'll just enjoy this new treasure I've gained. I can think about a month from now when the time comes. Maybe, by some miracle, Miyagi might turn into a cat that does fetch.

I tug on my earlobe embellished with the earring and check the time. Still early for university. I decide to have a drink before leaving and open the door. Upon entering the shared space, I spot Miyagi.

"Heading out already?"

I call out, and Miyagi turns to look at me. Ever since I got my piercings, especially when we eat, I can feel her gaze drawn to my ears. From the night of her birthday onward, Miyagi has been looking my way more often.

"Yeah."

Her gaze doesn't waver. Boldly, Miyagi fixes her eyes on my earrings.

I never imagined the earrings would have this effect.

Just by piercing my ears, I can captivate Miyagi's attention. More than just her eyes, I want more from her. If by offering a part of myself I could draw Miyagi closer, I'd give up as much as I needed. If she says the words, I would give her anything she desires.

Would Miyagi answer if I asked what she wants?

Immersed in such thoughts, not exactly wholesome, Miyagi's voice brings me back to reality.

"You're not leaving yet, Sendai-san?"

A bit exasperated with myself for pondering what more I could offer, I let out a small sigh.

Miyagi's presence is consuming too much of me. The overwhelming portion of my thoughts is occupied by her, to the extent that it feels she might repaint the entirety of who I am. It's slightly terrifying to think about where exactly I exist within myself if Miyagi envelops all of me.

"Sendai-san?"

Miyagi calls out to my silent self. I can't just stay silent to a question begging an immediate answer. I look her in the eyes and smile softly.

"Not just yet. I'm planning on applying lip balm on you, Miyagi."

The lip balm I gifted her remains untouched on her lips.

"No need. I'm leaving now."

My response seems to displease her; she visibly grimaces.

"Won't you use the lip balm?"
"I can use it later. I already used it once, the day you gave it to me."
"You should use it every day."

It makes me happy knowing she uses the items I gift her. Just like the black cat plush always sitting in her room, I want her to use the lip balm too.

"No way."
"How about I agree to do one thing you ask, and in exchange, you let me apply it?"

It's a far better idea than pondering what part of me to offer, and I genuinely want her to make use of the gift I gave.

"...Any request, as long as it's within reason?"
"Anything, as long as it's within common sense."

Miyagi scrutinizes me with a challenging expression. Applying lip balm isn't a massive demand; there's no need for such contemplation. There might be discrepancies in our notion of common sense, but I wouldn't defy Miyagi, so it shouldn't be problematic. Yet, after pondering for a good minute, she finally gives me an answer.

"Promise you'll keep your word, Sendai-san."
"I will, so bring me the lips balm."

Reluctantly, she retrieves the lip balm from her bag and hands it over with a face twice as displeased as before.

It wasn't in her room.

Swallowing my words before they spill from my lips, I stay silent. If I were to say that, Miyagi might snatch the lip balm from me and dash off to university.

"So, what's the request you have for me, Miyagi?"
"I haven't decided yet. Is it okay to ask later?"
"Sure. Then, close your eyes."

At my quiet command, she closes her eyes without any resistance. Though one doesn't need closed eyes to apply lip balm, I want them shut this time.

Instead of using the lip balm, I brush my fingers against her lips. Letting my fingers glide, I caress her cheek before pressing my lips upon hers. She pushes back on my shoulder, but longing to taste further into her depths, I attempt a deeper kiss, only to be rewarded with a kick to the leg. Reluctantly, I pull away, when once again Miyagi kicks me and audibly protests.

"You weren't supposed to kiss me; you were putting on lip balm."
"I forgot."

I flash a playful smile and remove the cap from the lip balm. As its sweet scent wafts through the air, Miyagi closes her eyes again. Slowly and meticulously, I paint over her soft lips.

"There, all done."

Miyagi exudes a delectable aroma. Though tempted to kiss her once more, I refrain, lest she refuse to let me apply lip balm in the future.

"...Thanks. I’m off."

Saying so, Miyagi retrieves the lip balm from my hand, tucking it into her bag, and makes her way out. Before she can leave, I grip her arm.

"Wait a moment. Let's go together."
"No. I'm heading out first."
"Hold on, can’t you wait for me?"
"Not waiting."

With a swift motion, she frees herself from my grasp and leaves the shared space. I rush back to my room, grab my bag, and make my way to the entrance at a brisk pace. As I slip on my shoes and open the door, I find Miyagi standing there, eliciting a startled "Ah!" from me.

"Were you waiting for me?"
"No, I wasn’t."

Miyagi glances at my ear and begins walking. After locking up, I chase after her.

Miyagi's Gaze (II)

Part 197

"Morning, Hazuki!"

As I prepare my notebook and pen in the lecture hall, sitting slightly above the center, and fidget with my ears, Mio greets me.

"Morning."

Energetic as ever, Mio bounds over and plops down beside me. A few people glance at her, but she seems unconcerned. It was Mio who gave me the opportunity to become a tutor. She's easygoing and friendly, though often a bit careless.

Come to think of it, her senior was quite laid-back too.

Mio's senior, who introduced me to Kikyo-chan, was someone who'd easily double the time of a promised three-hour wait.

"Something good happen, Hazuki?" Mio asks, her voice curious as I touch my earring.

A small round piece is securely attached to my earlobe. Even though I know there's no way I could have lost it on my way to university, I find reassurance in feeling the earring with my fingertips.

“Not really. Why do you ask?”

I respond in my usual tone.

"You've been smiling a lot, so I thought maybe something good happened," Mio remarks cheerfully.

It's not that nothing good happened. I simply said "nothing" to avoid a complicated conversation about what might be considered good. Truth is, today I've been feeling great since the morning.

Miyagi let me apply her lip balm, and we walked to the station together. I'm even wearing the earrings she put on for me.

But these are not the sort of details I'd share with Mio.

"I guess it's because I saw Mike-chan on the way to the station."

I offer a non-committal explanation and turn what might be perceived as a lingering smile into a more discernible grin.

"The cat you've mentioned?"

"That's right."

Mike-chan only appears on my way home from university. I didn't actually meet it on my way to the station today either. But claiming to have seen something I didn't for the sake of smooth human relations is a minor issue. Besides, Miyagi is sort of like a stray cat herself, so it's not a big lie.

"You really like cats," Mio says thoughtfully, adding, "they are cute though." She then glances at my ear and, a bit surprised, asks, "Are those earrings?"

"Yes, they are."

"Didn't you say you weren't interested in earrings? Did something happen?"

"Just changed my mind."

Mio's "I see" carries a hint of skepticism. I've told her before that I wasn't interested in earrings when she asked several times, so her mixed reaction makes sense. Her eyes linger on my ear, and it feels like an unwelcome turn is coming.

"Ah, I get it. It's because of a boyfriend, right?"

Mio grins slyly at me.

"It's not."

"No, it definitely is. You haven't been hanging out much. Over summer break, you kept declining my invites saying you were busy, right?"

I saw this coming. Even in college, half of all conversations revolves around romance, not much different from high school. It's as if, if you cut a girl in half, instead of blood, "love" would spill out.

I don't dislike listening to romance stories, but when asked to share, I'm at a loss. Explaining things about Miyagi is difficult.

It's not that I don't trust Mio, rather, I'm unsure of what might happen if I share. Besides, I'm not aiming for an intimate friendship, so I prefer to keep certain things private.

"Really, it was just work and other things keeping me busy," I insist.

"I won't steal your boyfriend or anything," Mio says.

"That's not what I'm worried about."

"Alright then," she says, extending her right hand like she's expecting something.

"What's that hand for?"

"Show me your phone."

"Why?"

"Just checking if your lock screen has a picture of him."

"I'm telling you, I don't have a boyfriend!"

I swat at Mio's outstretched hand.

"If that's the case, then let's all go out for a meal sometime. Some guys were asking me to bring you along, and it's becoming a bit of a problem for me."

"Stop making things up."

"I'm serious. Please make an appearance, just once."

"Maybe someday."

"When you say 'someday,' you don't intend to come, do you?"

“Well, probably not.”

I laugh, making Mio exaggeratedly sigh, then she grips my shoulder and gives me a bright smile.

“Then how about working at a café instead? Just a short stint.”

“You’ve really jumped in conversation topics there.”

“Details, details. Who cares? My club's preoccupied with preparing for the cultural festival, so I can't work as much lately.”

I let out a sigh myself, reacting to Mio’s typically carefree invitation.

“So you want me to cover your shifts?”

"Pretty much."

"Is it okay for someone else to take over your job?"

"It's my relative's place, so it's fine. Just until the festival ends. And it’s more of a problem if they’re short-staffed. I trust you to manage. If not, you could handle the festival prep and I could work."

A light and unconvincing "It’s fine" trails from Mio’s lips, followed by the lecture room door opening as the teacher enters.

The culture festival is just over a month away. Preparing for that is out of the question, but I am interested in the job.

Honestly, I had intended to work more than just my tutoring job during summer break, but I prioritized spending time with Miyagi. I still don’t want to reduce my time with her but I also want to dedicate time for my future.

After graduation, I'll need money to continue living here. I can't rely on my parents, nor do I wish to. Even if Miyagi decides to end our roommate arrangement, I don’t plan on returning home. And of course, I have no intention of ending my life with Miyagi; I’d work to keep living together, even just as roommates.

"So, what about the job? It's okay if it's a no. I can ask someone else."

With the lecture started, Mio's small voice drifts over.

"Let's talk more about it later, okay?"

I whisper back, to which she responds, "Okay."

With plans to increase work hours during the winter break, taking on another job until the festival as a rehearsal isn't a bad idea.

The main concern is Miyagi. She's not thrilled about me working more.

Even if she disapproves, I could still take the part-time job, but that probably won't end well.

I touch my earring, caressing it as I exhale softly.

The teacher's voice resonates as the sound of pens scratching across notebooks fills the air. I slowly grip my pen and begin jotting down notes. Lost in thought, the lecture ends in what seems like no time.

I leave Mio hanging on the job discussion. After attending all my classes for the day, I head home.

The part-time job isn't unusual. Just a café staff position with decent pay. I have no reason to decline except for concerns about Miyagi, which stop me from committing.

It's uncharacteristic of me, I think. Decisions I'd usually rush through now have me hesitating. Miyagi's growing presence in my mind surfaces whenever I consider my actions.

I find myself swaying on the train, watching for Mike-chan as I walk from the station. But, perhaps because I lied about seeing it earlier, it doesn't appear.

Ascending the stairs to the third floor, I open the front door. Miyagi's shoes are there. I take a deep breath, remove my shoes, and head into the shared space.

"I'm home," I call out to Miyagi, who is pouring soda into a glass.

"Welcome back," she replies, fixing me with a steady gaze. The lip balm I applied on her lips this morning is completely gone, and I

can't tell whether it wore off or she removed it.

"I want to discuss something, so can you come to my room after we eat?" I ask.

"What is it?" Miyagi's voice drops a little, perhaps sensing something unwelcome.

"I'll tell you later."

"Can't it be now?"

"I'd like to talk about it slowly, so I'd prefer to do it after," I explain.

Miyagi doesn't respond immediately, opting instead to drink the soda she's just poured. The clear liquid sways in the glass as it disappears into her.

She places the glass, still half full, onto the table and her gaze zeroes in on my earrings. It's a different look from Mio's, and it makes my ears feel hot. For a moment, the thought of the part-time job slips away, practically vanishing with the warmth in my ears as I tug on them to cool down.

"...Okay," Miyagi finally replies quietly, still looking at me.

Miyagi's Gaze (III)

Part 198

When I call out to Miyagi, she responds with a simple "What?"
And then, silence takes over the room.
As promised before dinner, Miyagi is in my room.

However, instead of sitting next to me as usual, she is positioned diagonally in front of me.

Even before she speaks, I can tell Miyagi is in a foul mood.

"Want me to refill your soda?"

I lean back against the bed, reaching for the empty glass, but before I can touch it, Miyagi, who has been silently sitting there, speaks in a rather curt voice.

"Didn't you say you had something to talk about?"

She avoids looking at my ear. Her gaze is fixed on the platypus tissue cover on the floor.

"I do."
"Then, hurry up and say it."

Miyagi's cold voice chills me to the bone. Although I haven't uttered a word about work since I returned, Miyagi has already sensed that the topic isn't a pleasant one.

I let out a small sigh.

When I first decided to take on a tutoring job, it was easy to talk about. But now, it feels impossible.

I've become more cowardly than I was back then.

This job isn't like tutoring; it's something for about a month, not something long-term. It's manageable, something I can laugh off because it's short-term, and I should approach it that way. I don't

necessarily need Miyagi's consent to work. If I want to do it, I can, and if not, I don't have to.

"Sendai-san, stop being silent and just speak."

Miyagi speaks in a low voice. She wouldn't dislike me for just taking up another part-time job, right? Even if it makes her upset, it should only be temporary. There was a time she told me to quit the tutoring job, but here I am without having stopped.

"About what I wanted to talk about..."

Despite building a wall of excuses inside me, pushing the word "job" up my throat, it doesn't come out. I'm so consumed by Miyagi that I can't even say something as basic as this.

"Sendai-san, what's next?"

Miyagi looks at my earrings. I inhale and exhale.

"...It's about a part-time job."

Somehow, I manage to release a part of what I want to say, nudging a cat-shaped chopstick rest on the table with my fingertip. Instead of meowing, the tabby cat leans against the white cat next to it with a soft sound.

"A tutoring one?"
"Different job. It's a short-term, about a month, but I've been asked if I'd work at a café."
"Why are you telling me this?"
"I thought it was the right thing to do."
"Like when you decided on the tutoring job, you could've decided this on your own."
"That's true, but I thought I should let you know, Miyagi."
"I heard you, what now?"

Her voice, prickly with thorns, pierces my eardrums.

Miyagi's mood grows worse and worse, while my spirits sink lower and lower. I feel like I'm on a descent from the third floor to the first, digging down to the Earth's mantle.

If I don't speak up now, I might never be able to utter the word 'job'

again.

“I want to know how you feel about me working.”

Firmly, I state this and meet Miyagi's eyes from my diagonal seat.

“Keep the promise from this morning.”

Her voice has taken on an even more irritable tone.

“The promise from this morning?”
“You said if I let you apply my lip balm, you’d listen to me, right?”
“I did, but…”
“Then listen now and don’t take the job, okay?”
“That’s not within the bounds of common sense, don’t you think?”

I remember back to when I told Miyagi I was considering a tutoring job. As part of a penalty game, I agreed to do whatever she said just once, which led to her getting her ears pierced. Though the context of “obeying” this time is different from that day, the situation feels all too familiar.

“Does this mean you won’t give up on the job?”

Miyagi knits her brows.

“That’s what it means.”
“If you’ll do it even if I say no, then my opinion doesn’t matter, does it?”
“It does in a way.”

Indirectly, but it does matter. I crave Miyagi’s approval. Even though I’m not willing to abide by a request to stop working, I still want to hear her say it’s okay.
For this reason, I ask her one more thing.

“What will you do after you graduate from university, Miyagi?”
“What happened to the job talk?”
“It’ll come up later, but for now, just answer the question.”
“I haven’t decided yet. I’ll work normally, I guess.”

Her words leave out the part I most want to know. I can’t tell if it’s intentional, but to uncover the hidden parts, I ask, “Will you go back home?”, and Miyagi mutters softly.

“What about you, Sendai-san?”
“I don’t plan to return home after graduation; I intend to find employment here. Even if I don’t succeed with a job, I won’t go back. So, I want to save money by working part-time.”

I want to continue living with Miyagi, in any kind of relationship. That’s part of why I want to work. But I don’t mention this yet. If I do now, I’m scared she’ll run away.

“I see.”
“And you, Miyagi?”
“I haven’t decided.”

Her voice is uncertain, lacking confidence, making me want to urge her to decide immediately. But if I push her, she might just say she'll go back home.

“Alright.”

When I reply briefly, she doesn’t hide her dissatisfaction.

“After this talk, what do you want from me, Sendai-san? If you have reasons to work, do it without worrying about me.”
“If I’m going to work, I want you to say it’s okay, Miyagi.”
“I don’t want to say that.”
“Do you hate it that much?”

Miyagi averts her eyes from me and grabs the platypus, throwing it at me. The platypus with tissues hits my leg.

“Sendai-san, you're not keeping your promise, and I hate it.”

She pouts, like a sulking child, and reaches for the platypus again, so I catch her hand.

“If it’s anything other than asking me not to work, tell me, and I’ll do it.”
“Really, anything?”
“I’ll do anything, for now.”

I grip her hand and smile gently, as Miyagi’s gaze wanders to the platypus.

She seems deep in thought, not opening her mouth. When I call her name, her hand escapes mine.

Her eyes, which had been on the platypus, are now on me.
But she remains silent.
She simply stares, then looks away, and looks back at me again.

I have a bad feeling.

“—Since that time, have you done it yourself?”

A small voice barely reaches me, and I almost ask her to repeat it but swallow back the words.

I don’t need to ask what "that time" refers to. It’s the day Miyagi first touched me.

And I also know what "done it yourself" refers to. It's what she asked me that day, the truth I admitted.

“…Do you think I’d answer that?”

The meaning of her words is clear, but that only makes it harder to respond honestly.

“You just said you’d do anything.”
“Is this just to trouble me?”

This isn't the kind of question you should ask in a situation like this. Frankly, it can't be something Miyagi really needs to know. She's probably just trying to steer the conversation towards getting me to promise not to take the job by asking something she thinks I can't answer.

If that's the case, Miyagi doesn't understand me.

While I can't agree to her request not to take the job due to its implications for my future, I'm willing to accept most other requests. This question included. It's embarrassing and hard to confront, but if Miyagi truly wants to know, I'll answer.

"It doesn’t matter what the reason is. If you answer, I won't ask you not to take that job," Miyagi says quietly, gripping the toy platypus tightly.

"Don't go back on that," I reply.

"Okay," she says, her voice firm.

I take a deep breath, slowly exhale, and look away from her, focusing on the platypus Miyagi's holding. Without lying, I answer.

"...I did."

Saying it makes my voice come out smaller than I'd thought, filling me with the heat of embarrassment deep within.

She doesn't respond. The lack of a retort makes me acutely aware of my own heartbeat as the silence hangs in the air. I glance up in discomfort to find Miyagi's surprised expression, as if she didn't expect me to actually answer.

“What... do you think about while doing it?” Miyagi asks hesitantly, but with a clear voice.

It isn't necessary to answer such a question, and Miyagi should know it's not something that needs to be asked. Still, she calls my name, "Sendai-san," clearly unwilling to let me avoid responding.

“When I was with you,” I respond in a single breath. As Miyagi opens her mouth to say more, I immediately add, “That's enough, right? Let's end this.”

"But I still have things I want to ask."

"The deal was to answer one thing. I've answered two, so I think I'm being very generous. Does this fulfill the promise?"

I sit beside Miyagi, and she nudges my leg with her foot. It seems her mood hasn't completely improved, though she doesn't attempt to move away or push me further.

"Sort of," she replies, sounding displeased.

"I think October will be busy, but the job is just until the school festival. I'll let you know if I'm going to be late," I assure her.

"Is that a promise?"

"A promise. I swear by the earrings."

I kiss Miyagi's ear, and she gives my shoulder a firm shove.

"If you break your promise, there'll be a penalty game."

"Understood."

With that short reply, Miyagi takes hold of the platypus's hand instead of mine.

Volume 7 Extra

A Distant Memory, Today with Sendai-san

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 198-extra

In front of the entrance, I take my key out of my schoolbag and open the door.

"I'm home."

I turn on the light and take off my shoes, but there's no reply. Not that I'd call out "Dad," anyway. Dad doesn't finish work by the time I return from school, and he said he'd be late again today. Mom isn't here anymore, so there's no point in calling out for anyone. This house is always empty, and even today, on my ninth birthday, there's no one home.

After neatly arranging my shoes, I turn on the hallway light and head to my room. I place my schoolbag on the desk and take out my notebook and textbooks for the homework I must take to school tomorrow. I also pull out the printout I need to give to Dad and head to the living room. Even though Dad isn't here now, he said he would try to be back in time for my birthday. He even promised to bring home a cake. But Dad always says he'll come home and he never does.

"I'll leave the printout here."

Even though there's nobody around, I announce it as I place it on the table. The living room is bright with the curtains open, so I don't turn on the lights as I return to my room.

On any other day, I'd finish my homework right away, but since it's my birthday, I decide it's okay to put it off and read some manga. After reading three volumes, I get bored and switch to playing games. Since it's my birthday, I want to play on the bigger TV in the living room, so I take my game console and head there.

After connecting the cord, I start playing the game, and time flies by. It's still bright outside, but I turn on the lights before it gets dark and continue playing. After playing more than usual and alternately winning and losing car races, the intercom buzzes, and I dash over. Peeking at the intercom screen, I see the lady who usually helps with meals and cleaning.

I clench my hands tightly. I didn't think it was Dad, so it's okay. Standing on my tiptoes, I press the talk button and say, "Yes?"

"Good evening. Is that Shiori-chan?"

Hearing the familiar voice, I reply, "Yes, it is," and through the intercom, she says, "It's usually not a day I come, but your father asked me to bring you a cake."

"I'll open the door."

I unlock the auto-lock. The intercom buzzes again soon after, and I unlock the front door.

"Good evening, Shiori-chan."

A woman carrying a cake box comes in with a cheerful voice.

"Good evening," I say back.

"You know, Shiori-chan, your father is busy with work today and won't make it in time for your birthday."

"I understand."

"I'm sorry. But your father said, 'Happy birthday.'"

"Thank you."

I meant to thank her for relaying Dad's words, but it felt like I was thanking Dad himself. Realizing this, thanking someone for "I'm sorry" feels strane, but in times like these, I don't know what to say. I stare at her feet instead of her face when I hear her soft voice.

"Happy birthday, Shiori-chan! This is a present from me."

Looking up, she hands me a small, wrapped bag.

"Thank you very much."

I bow my head slightly.

"I brought a big cake for you. I'll also make dinner, so can I come in?"

"I still have some side dishes you made for me the other day in the freezer."

"But since it's your birthday, I'd like to cook for you, if that's okay?"

"Yes, thank you."

With that, she locks the front door and removes her shoes.

Walking down the hallway, she turns off the entryway light, and I follow her.

"I'll put the cake in the refrigerator."

From the kitchen, she calls, and I answer, "Okay."

"Would you like omelet rice for dinner?"

"Okay."

"Then wait for a bit, okay?"

"Can I stay in my room?"

"Sure. I'll come and get you when it's ready."

"Okay."

Bowing politely, I pick up the present she gave me along with my game console left in front of the TV, then head back to my room.

I sit at my desk, where my homework is, and pick up a pencil. I don't like being alone, but I also don't like having someone I'm not particularly close to in the house either.

This older sister was arranged by Dad to come help around the house and she's not a bad person. She's kind to me and helps with cooking and cleaning, but I feel uneasy when she's around. Even when we're together, we have nothing to talk about, and it feels suffocating—like holding my face under water.

I open my textbooks and notebook and begin practicing my kanji writing. I don't like homework, but there's nothing else to do with big sister. It's easier staying in my room and continuing to write kanji.

Even though I was writing each character carefully, I finished all the kanji I was told to write in no time. With nothing else to do, I move on to math homework and focus on solving the problems. Not long after, I hear a knock at the door.

"Shiori-chan."

Hearing a voice from outside the room, I respond, "Yes," and open the door.

"I've left the omelet rice on the table, so please eat it. I also made some extra meals for later."

"Thank you very much."

"I'm heading out now, but will Shiori-chan be okay by yourself?"

"I'll be fine."

After answering, she heads toward the entrance. As I follow her, she turns on the lights and puts on her shoes, reminding me, "Be sure to lock the door."

"Yes. Thank you for today."

I bow my head as she says, "See you," and steps out. I lock the door and leaving all the lights on, head back to my room. Carrying the gift she gave me, I make my way to the living room where the curtains are now closed. But with the lights on, the room is still bright. The kitchen is dark with the lights off, so I turn on the kitchen light, clearing all the dark areas to keep the ghosts away before returning to the living room. The omelet rice, its yellow egg glistening, sits on the table, and the printout for Dad was moved to

the side.

At times like this, I wish I had a big dog like the one at my friend's house. If I had a dog, it would probably follow me to the bathroom or sleep beside me. Then even a dark room wouldn’t be scary. If there were a ghost, I feel like it would bark and chase it away. But Dad says a kid can't take care of a dog alone, so I can't have one.

Being a kid is boring. I want to grow up quickly. When I become an adult, I'm sure ghosts won't scare me, and maybe then I'll be allowed to have a pet. However, once I'm an adult and ghosts don't scare me anymore, perhaps I won't feel the need for a pet. I don't really know, but maybe the problem is just that I'm still a kid.

Today, I turned nine, which means next I'll be ten, then eleven after that. Celebrating birthdays makes me one step closer to becoming an adult, so birthdays are fun. Yes, they are fun even if I'm alone.

To become an adult, just having birthdays isn't enough; I also need to eat lots of food.

I finish eating the bright yellow omelet rice, clean the plate, and then retrieve the box containing the cake from the refrigerator, placing it on the table. After preparing another plate, I decide to open the gift big sister gave me before eating the cake. Inside is a pouch that's adorably adorned with lace, almost too cute to handle, so I put it back in the bag for now.

I turn my attention to the cake box. It's bigger than the one from last year, and when I take it out, there's a large, round, white cake that I couldn't possibly finish alone. Carefully avoiding the red strawberries and the chocolate plaque that reads "Happy Birthday, Shiori-chan," I set up the candles.

But I don't light them because children shouldn't use fire without permission. I don't sing a song. I don't even turn off the lights.

"Happy birthday, Shiori-chan," I mutter to myself, pretending to blow out the candles.

Cutting a slice with a fork, I transfer the uneven triangle onto a plate. The first bite is sweet and delicious. The second bite is still sweet. By the third bite, the sweetness is overwhelming, and I realize I can't eat much more.

Still, it was a cake that someone specially bought for me, so I continue munching on the awkwardly shaped triangle. Even though it makes me feel sick, I finish the piece on my plate, then carve another uneven triangle from the now no longer round cake and continue eating.

However, after eating only a quarter of the cake, I feel full. Despite this, I pick off a strawberry from the remaining cake and eat it. I take a bit of cream, then toss some sponge cake into my mouth. After stuffing as much of the white sweetness as I can into my already bloated stomach, I return the rest of the cake to the box.

As long as there is cake remaining, it feels like my birthday will never end. Tomorrow, the day after, and the day after that, as long as the cake is in the fridge, it'll be another birthday, and Dad won't come home. That's how it feels.

— I hate this.

I wish my birthday would just be over.

I place the box containing the now misshapen cake back into the fridge and shut the door firmly.

"It'll be gone soon" I murmur.

Leaving the lights on throughout the house, I return to my room and crawl into bed, even though I'm not sleepy.

* * *

In the distance, I hear an alarm sounding. Lying in bed, I fumble around with my right and left hand until I finally grab my phone and turn it off. But the sound doesn't stop. Opening my eyes, I realize I'm clutching a black cat plush. I grab my actual phone nearby to stop the alarm once and for all.

— I'm so sleepy.

Placing the black cat by my pillow and rubbing my eyes, my fingertips feel damp. I raise my hand toward the ceiling and notice my fingers are slightly wet, making me blink rapidly.

"I feel like I was dreaming about something, but..."

Yawning, I sit up and stretch.

"What was it?"

Tilting my head in thought, I try to recall the dream, but it seems to have been buried deep in my head and I can't remember. Besides, I'm still sleepy.

Maybe I'm tired from celebrating Sendai-san's birthday yesterday. I bought a cake and came home, ordered pizza delivery before she returned, and anxiously waited for her, even letting her into my room for the first time since moving in. It's no wonder my energy and mental strength are beyond their limits.

On top of that, I'd been agonizing over what to get her as a birthday gift. With a sigh, I look at the bag on the table.

"What should I do..."

Inside the bag is a wrapped box and a message card. The box contains cat-shaped chopstick rests.

Put simply, it's the birthday present for Sendai-san that I couldn't give her yesterday.

"...She doesn't really need it, does she?"

Having never given a birthday present to someone like Sendai-san, I didn't know what to buy and ended up choosing something like chopstick rests, which didn't seem like a proper birthday gift at all.

I considered dog-themed items because she resembles a Borzoi, but she once gave me a black cat plush, often talks about a calico cat we sometimes see on the way back from university, and when asked about who she likes at the aquarium, she mentioned "Mike-chan," the calico cat. So, I decided on something cat-themed. However, when the day to give the present arrived, But when the day came to give the present, it suddenly felt strange to hand over just some chopstick rests, and so the little cat-shaped rests ended up being shut away in this room.

Slapping my cheeks with both hands, I stretch my arms high

towards the ceiling.

Getting off the bed with a decisive "Here goes!" I grab the black cat plush.

It's only weird because I'm overthinking it.

Since it’s a birthday present for Sendai-san, no matter what the it is, I should give it to her.

I place the black cat on the bookshelf and grab the bag containing the chopstick rests. Quietly, still in my sweats, I head out to the shared space, standing before Sendai-san’s room. Being as silent as possible, I hang the bag containing the cat chopstick rests on her doorknob and step away.

I don't think it's something Sendai-san needs.

There are five chopstick rests in the set instead of just one, making them even more unnecessary. But since I couldn't think of anything else suitable for a birthday gift, it couldn't be helped. I could never come up with the right gift for someone as different from me as Sendai-san.

Still, I placed the present somewhere it could at least fulfill its role as a gift.

Quietly, ever so quietly, I return to my room.

"I gave it to her," I tell the black cat on the shelf, though that wasn’t quite true, as I gently stroked its head.

Chapter 66 Extra

Black Cat's Soliloquy

(Black Cat PoV)
Part 196-extra

Shiori-chan doesn’t have the habit of giving names.

That’s why neither I, the black cat plushie, nor the crocodile tissue cover has a name. But Shiori-chan sleeps with me every night and sometimes kisses me, so even without a name, I’m happy, and every day is enjoyable.

I want to stay with Shiori-chan forever, although that doesn’t mean I have no complaints.

During the day, Shiori-chan goes to a place called university, leaving me alone with Mr. Crocodile, and I have to watch over the books on the shelf, which is a bit boring. I wish she’d come back soon, but even if she returns early, it gets duller when Sendai-san comes over to the room.

That’s because when Shiori-chan is with Sendai-san, she stops talking to me.

However, since Sendai-san is the one who introduced me to Shiori-chan, I allow her to talk with Shiori-chan and even kiss her.

But, all the same.
I wish Shiori-chan would talk to me even when Sendai-san is around.

If she did, it wouldn't be boring, but Shiori-chan doesn't do that.

Humans are difficult to understand.
There are so many things I don’t get.

I watch Sendai-san from the bookshelf.
With hair longer and slightly browner than Shiori-chan's, the

fashionable Sendai-san is next to Shiori-chan today, too. She speaks cheerfully to Shiori-chan, who appears to be in a bad mood.

Shiori-chan is always like that.
When she's with Sendai-san, she’s somewhat grumpy and speaks less. Still, they kiss each other a lot.

I can't tell if they get along well or not.
Humans are truly difficult to understand.

Chapter 67

It's All Sendai-san's Fault (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 199

Getting undressed is not a difficult task. If there are buttons, you simply unbutton them, and if there's a zipper, you just pull it down. It's something anyone can do, and of course, so can I.

Sendai-san doesn't run away from my touch. Even if she seems like she might, I reassure her it's fine, and she accepts whatever comes next.

I turn off the light. There isn't a single challenging thing about it.

In the darkness of the room, not even a nightlight illuminating us, I reach out for Sendai-san on the bed. My hands graze against something — a blouse or maybe a cut-and-sew top — and I fumble to take it off. She mirrors my actions, slowly removing my clothing.

Before I can pin her down, I find myself gently pushed back onto the bed.

Sendai-san's hand rests firmly on my shoulder. Her fingers, neither distinctly warm nor cold, undo my bra and touch my skin directly.

I want to see her face, concealed by darkness. Even as I strain my eyes, I can't see it.

I reach up, feeling as if Sendai-san's outline and body heat will blend into the darkness and disappear, and I can feel her body heat on my fingertips. As if to confirm her blurry appearance, I slide my hand over her and remove her bra. Touching her soft curves, I confirm the memories buried within.

The smoothness of her skin is familiar and comforting.

"Shiori."

A slightly hushed voice whispers in my ear. When my fingers move, Sendai-san follows suit. She tenderly strokes my chest, collarbone, and side, softly repeating my name.

— Why did it end up like this?

Caught in the tender moment, my capacity for rational thought slips away. The tranquility of the embrace, like soaking in warm water, transforms into something beyond control, with an unrecognizable voice dissolving into the night.

"Call me Hazuki."

Words I've heard many times fill the air.

"Hazuki."

As I utter the name that had stayed unspoken, the darkness deepens.

In the pitch-black room, I'm unsure of where her hands are touching. When I call out to the unseen Sendai-san, a voice near my ear murmurs, "Shiori."

Over and over, the sound echoes.

I'm uncertain if it's pleasurable, yet it is. There is nothing tangibly present, yet a buoyant pleasure remains.

Sendai-san's voice, her touch, everything about her. It's all so good that I crave more.

I loop my arms around her back, pulling her closer. Our bodies press together, and the soft sensation is endless, pierced only by a shrill noise.

Annoying. So loud that I can't hear Sendai-san's voice.

Focusing, I realize it's a smartphone alarm, rudely pulling the veil of darkness away.

I close my eyes, rub them, and gradually open them again. Beside me is just a black cat plush, and nobody else is in the room.

Of course, no one would be.

The usual morning, where the smartphone rouses me. I toss the black cat into the air.

"…Annoying."

Catching the plush as it falls, I let out a deep sigh. It's because of the strange things Sendai-san says that I end up like this.

Dreams that seem vivid yet lack clarity in details.

Even before, when she told me she was going to work in a café, I had a similar dream. More than a week has passed since then.

"Annoying."

I repeat the word that had just left my mouth. I could forgive it if it only happened once, but I never expected to have such a dream a second time.

Why, just why. Why does merely hearing her words lead me to such dreams?

— Since then, did you do it yourself?

I was the one who asked, curious to know, but I didn't expect an answer. Having assumed she wouldn't reply, Sendai-san shouldn't have answered. And yet, her answer brought back the memories that had faded into my daily life, clear and vivid, encroaching into my dreams.

Sendai-san's hand that touched me. My hand that touched her body. The voice that spoke and the voice I heard.

The dream pulled all the stored memories into the light, peeling away at my fragile, cracking self. Stripping away the layers covering me, Sendai-san slips in, filling the gaps. Not only filling them, but she starts to claim space that was once mine, covering all of me with her presence.

I place the black cat next to my pillow and sit up.

"Isn't Sendai-san an idiot?"

Even though I know it's self-inflicted, I can't help but complain. If I stay quiet, I fear losing who I am.

Sighing once, I get out of bed.

I leave the room, washing my face and brushing my teeth before returning. After getting dressed, I place the black cat back on the bookshelf and head to the shared space, where I find Sendai-san preparing breakfast. I greet her with a "Good morning."

"Morning."

A cheerful voice responds, and I watch Sendai-san intently.

Her voice and figure, unchanged from the dream.

If I reach out, I can touch her. Just like in the dream, Sendai-san won't evade my touch. Even if she tries to escape, as long as I reassure her it's fine to do the same—

No.

The Sendai-san here and now is just a roommate. Despite leaving an indelible mark, our relationship as roommates hasn't changed. We're maintaining the status quo and will continue to do so. Yet, I yearn to make a mark that will soon vanish.

I exhale softly.

The confusion storming inside my head is all Sendai-san's fault. The chaos and absurdity too are her doing.

"What is it?"

She asks, and I move to her side.

"What do you mean?"

I reply, retrieving two glasses from the cupboard.

"You were staring, so I thought there might be something."

"There's nothing."

I answer curtly, placing the glasses on the table.

"Hey, I'm working today, so I'll be back late."

On Saturdays and some weekdays.

Due to the increased shifts at her part-time job, Sendai-san seems to spend more time working than at home. Though it's only for the month leading up to the school festival, the existence of a Sendai-san I don't know doesn't sit well with me.

Even though the job ends at a set time and she returns home, I still secretly wish she would just quit.

"…I know. You told me yesterday too."

Annoyed, I respond coldly to Sendai-san's repeated remarks.

"I mentioned it yesterday, but I thought I'd remind you today too. I don't want you saying there's a penalty game."

"If you're too late, there’s a penalty game."

"That's new. Can't I just contact you?"

"No. It's against the rules if you're excessively late, even if you contact me."

I don't particularly want to add more rules or force penalty games on her. But I do want to bind her in some way.

"I don't suppose I can veto that rule."

"Sendai-san doesn't have veto rights."

"I know."

Sendai-san accepts the new rule as if it were the most natural thing, and I pour orange juice from the refrigerator into the glasses.

It's All Sendai-san's Fault (II)

Part 200

Before heading to the lecture hall, I stopped by the restroom and stood in front of the mirror. I retrieved the lip balm that Sendai-san had given me from my bag. As I removed the cap, its sweet scent triggered a memory of the dream I had just experienced.

In the dream, I called her Hazuki. I pulled Sendai-san toward me.

The memory of her softness and smoothness resurfaced, and feeling as if I was thinking about something indecent, I shook my head vigorously.

It's just lingering in my head, because I've had similar dreams twice in such a short time.

Convincing myself of this, I looked into the mirror at my lips with nothing on them. As I touched them with my fingertips, they glided smoothly over the surface without any resistance. There's no chapping. I was considering applying lip balm but hesitated. I sighed, biting my lip.

I closed the cap and stowed the lip balm back into my bag.

If I use it at home, Sendai-san might say something, and that would be troublesome, so I apply the lip balm after arriving at the university. But today, I decided against it. Because of that odd dream, I'm just not in the mood. The sweet fragrance reminds me of kissing Sendai-san, prompting further thoughts. I dread that little dream could grow and consume me.

I blame Sendai-san for all of this.

I turned my back on my reflection in the mirror and headed for the lecture hall. Perhaps because the summer break was so long, it still feels like summer even though it's October. While not enough to warrant air conditioning, there are still days that feel warm enough to crave ice cream, making it feel even more so. Even at university, I can't shake off the feeling of summer, often finding myself wanting

to lounge around at home or watch penguins at the aquarium.

With a wandering mind, I walked down the corridor, opened the door, and entered the lecture hall. I glanced around the room, which was about two-thirds full and bustling, searching for Maika and quickly spotted her familiar face.

"Morning," I greeted Maika, and she replied, "Morning," as I sat next to her.

"Huh? You didn't apply the lip balm today," Maika noted softly upon seeing my face, and I replied similarly, "Yeah, I didn't."

I'm using it since it was a birthday gift from Sendai-san.

The first time Maika saw me with the lip balm Sendai-san had gifted me she asked, "Are you going somewhere after class?", but now the idea that I use lip balm became normal. It's nice that wearing it doesn't seem unnatural, but it's a bit annoying that people think it's unnatural when I don't.

Whether Sendai-san is present or not, she influences my life.

"That lip balm is nice. It's exactly what you'd expect from Sendai-san," Maika said in an upbeat voice. I replied, "Is it?"

"It suits you, Shiori. Maybe I should have her pick one for me too," Maika added, cheerfully wearing her own lip balm in a lovely shade. In such moments, I know I should suggest something like, "Let's go shopping together," or "Stop by my place." But within me, there's a part that doesn't want to utter those common phrases.

I don't want Maika to meet Sendai-san.

I feel this strongly. Sendai-san makes my heart constrict exceedingly, preventing me from doing things that would be natural among friends.

It's as if my words are sealed with glue. If I stay silent, Maika might contact Sendai-san, and they might go looking for lip balm together, which causes a knot in my stomach.

Under the desk, I clenched my fist tightly.

My nails dug into my palms, and yet I continued to hold my fist as Maika, as if suddenly remembering, said, "Oh, by the way, Sendai-san's birthday is in August, right?"

"Yeah, August," I replied briefly, slowly unclenching my fingers.

"What does Sendai-san like? It doesn't have to be things; it can be people or places," Maika asked.

"Cats, maybe?"

"Oh, cats! She loves them so much she'd go out of her way to find them on her days off, right?"

"Seems that way," I confirmed.

Maika was thinking if she should give cat-themed gifts for Sendai-san's birthday next year, judging by the flow of our conversation. Anticipating this, I posed a question to her.

"Maika, do you want to grab dinner before heading home today?"

Since Maika has become close enough with Sendai-san to be in contact, it wouldn't be weird for her to give a gift, or she could quietly send something. I understand that what Maika says now isn't particularly important, but I don't want to hear it if it's about gifts.

"What about Sendai-san?"

"She's working," I replied.

"At the café job she recently started?"

"Yes. She said she'd be home late today."

Being home alone might only lead to excessive thinking, so I'd rather be with someone, if possible.

"Sendai-san is incredible, isn't she? Holding down multiple jobs like that. University students seem to have so much free time, but in reality, they're quite busy."

"I don't think she needs to work that much, but she said she wants to continue during winter break too."

"Sendai-san is different from the image I had of her in high school. I wouldn't have imagined she'd have jobs like tutoring or multiple side gigs. Back then, I'd have thought she'd join clubs and just have fun."

"True. Ibaraki-san and her crowd were flashy," I said, and Maika nodded.

Sendai-san, who was always with the standout Ibaraki-san, appeared much like her during that time, even in my perception. That image no longer persists. I've reconstructed a version of Sendai-san known only to me.

"Oh, I know! How about we have a meal at the café where Sendai-san works today?" Maika suggested suddenly, catching me off guard.

"Why?" I asked reflexively.

"Why not? I'd like to see Sendai-san at work. Wouldn't you, Shiori?"

I'm curious about what she does at work. But it's not a must-see for me. If I become aware of the surroundings she's now part of, I might want her to quit even more intensely, making it hard to honestly admit my curiosity.

"I didn't get the exact location, so I'm not sure," I lied.

"Then let's ask. We might get a reply before the day ends," she said, pulling her phone from her bag. I hurriedly intervened.

"I have a place in mind I'd like to try today."

"Where?"

"A place Asakura-san mentioned the other day," I said, naming a friend I met after entering university.

"Oh, the café with cute cream sodas?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"I'd been wanting to check that out too. Let's save Sendai-san's place for another time," Maika concluded.

I nodded vaguely, and just then, the door opened, and our professor entered. The lecture quickly began, but I couldn't absorb the content.

Having discussed Sendai-san just moments before, thoughts of her dominated my mind, leaving no room for the professor's words, nor could my hand record anything in my notebook.

Unlike her tutoring job, her café work is a place I can actually visit.

These thoughts had crossed my mind before, but Maika's comments prompted me to reconsider the idea. Sendai-san had casually invited me to come and eat there.

Time that I cannot claim.

Imagining myself merely observing from the sidelines was dreary. Trying to brush the idea of her job from my mind, I was instead greeted by the dream from this morning once more.

Perhaps Sendai-san has experienced a dream similar to mine. If she sees such dreams, I wonder what version of me appears in them.

I dwell repeatedly on thoughts I've never considered before. In the end, I can't focus on my classes, and the day passes without productivity. I end up going to a café with Maika that's not Sendai-san's workplace.

While Sendai-san is working, Maika and I indulge in trivial chatter. Though I'm not familiar with the menu at Sendai-san's café, this place's cream sodas are as cute as Asakura-san described, and the meals are delicious. Spending time with Maika is enjoyable. This fact remains true despite Sendai-san being busy with her job.

Time flies by, and I eventually part ways with Maika. Returning home, I switch on the lights in the shared space and take a seat.

Sendai-san hasn't come back yet. Even though I know she said she'd be late, her absence irritates me.

All day, my mind has been in turmoil. Because of Sendai-san, everything about me feels disordered.

I was supposed to be comfortable being alone, yet I'm unsettled by Sendai-san's absence. I was supposed to be accustomed to waiting for people who promised to return but didn't. Even knowing that Sendai-san would come back, her being late unsettles me. I was having fun just a moment ago, but now it's not fun anymore because Sendai-san is working part-time.

Standing a tube of lip balm on the table, I call out softly, knowing no one is there.

"...Hazuki."

Quickly, quickly, quickly. As soon as possible. I wish for nothing more than Sendai-san's return.

It's All Sendai-san's Fault (III)

Part 201

Before me lies the lip balm Sendai-san gave me, standing alone on the table. As I gaze at it, I mull things over.

By this time, she should have returned from her tutoring job, but Sendai-san mentioned she'd be home later than usual, so she isn't back yet.

Still, it might be better for me to return to my room. If I remain in this shared space, it'd seem like I'm waiting for her to come back.

But I don't feel like being alone in my room today. If I stay near the bed where I had the dream, I might find myself dwelling on unnecessary thoughts.

I topple the standing lip balm with my fingertip. Resting my face on the table, I call out, "Sendai-san."

The name she wants me to use is "Hazuki."

If I start calling her by that name, then Maika will likely do the same. This notion has been bugging me for some time. I start rolling the lip balm across the table with my finger.

It's not that I want to push Maika away. Maika is a crucial friend whom I'd be in trouble without.

Yet, there's a part of me fixated on trivial things, striving to keep Sendai-san from being surrounded by everything and everyone. I just can't convince that part of me.

It's a hassle.

With a sigh, I strain to listen as I think I hear a noise at the entrance. Faint footsteps reach my ears, making me sit up straight. My fingertip knocks into the lip balm, sending it rolling, and as I stand abruptly, I bump into the table.

"Ouch."

The lip balm doesn't share my pain. The cylindrical object rolls smoothly, moving towards the door separating the shared space from the hallway and touches the tip of Sendai-san's slipper just as she arrives home.

"I'm home. Here's something you dropped."

Sendai-san's voice carries hints of wanting to say more, but with a practiced smile, she holds back.

"…Thanks. Why'd you come home so early?"

The lip balm is returned to my hand by the last person I wanted to pick it up.

"Doesn't arriving late mean having a penalty game?"

Sendai-san speaks softly, setting her bag on the table.

"That's true."
"Then, there won't be a penalty today, right?"
"Why not?"
"Well, you just said I was early, didn't you?"

She did come home earlier than expected, but it was only slightly sooner than I guessed. In the spectrum of early to late, it's closer to late. But pushing for a penalty might only lead her to question why the lip balm ended up rolling on the floor.

"Since you arrived a bit earlier than I thought, we'll skip the penalty game today."
"Great. So, what were you up to, Miyagi? Were you waiting for me by any chance?"

With a gentle laugh, Sendai-san looks at my hand holding the lip balm.

"I wasn't waiting."

I kick at her legs.

"Ouch."

"I meant to do that."

I reply indifferently, stepping back half a step as her hand almost reaches for mine holding the lip balm. I distract her with more words.

"Is your job fun?"
"It's alright. The manager asked if I'd continue even after the college festival ends. Probably just a polite gesture, but it was nice to hear. I might work there during the winter break if they're short on hands."
"You're thinking about working there over winter break?"
"Want to join, Miyagi?"
"I told you before, I'm not interested."
"I remember. But if you change your mind, let me know. If you join me, I could look for a different job."
"I won't."

I glare at Sendai-san.
Yet, unfazed, she simply gazes back.
Our eyes lock, unmoving.

"Sendai-san, what?"

Encountering her unwavering gaze, I question her.

"What do you mean, what?"
"You're looking at me, so I'm asking."
"Well, you're looking at me too, Miyagi."
"I'm not. ...I just have something to ask."
"What do you want to ask?"

I escape her gaze, sitting back in the chair I was previously in, and inquire,

"Do you dream, Sendai-san?"

I don't want to discuss the job or the lipstick, but I dislike the idea of Sendai-san retreating to her room, so I struggle to produce a topic.

"A dream? You mean the kind at night, not future aspirations?"
"Yes."

Dreams are something I'd genuinely wanted to ask about, but I

spoke up without much thought, doubting I'd get the real answers I need. Honestly, I lack the resolve to dig deeper.

"I do sometimes. I once dreamt of eating salmon roe bowls with penguins."
"Huh?"

It's unclear whether to call it cute or surreal, but she describes this dream as I look up at her.

"A penguin about my size, and we were eating salmon roe bowls inside an igloo."

I didn't expect the answer I truly wanted, but her response defied my expectations entirely. I assumed she'd have more realistic dreams.

"…Do penguins eat salmon roe?"
"Who knows? But they eat fish, so maybe salmon roe isn't that strange? Salmon roe is part of the fish family, after all."

This sort of nonchalant remark is typical of Sendai-san. Her dreams likely follow the same whimsical pattern, yet the dreams I want to know about are different. I'm curious if she's ever seen dreams like the one I had today.

However, if I were to ask, she'd certainly inquire in return.

"—Any others?"
"Others?"
"Dreams besides the penguin one."

I can't outright ask.
I don't think it's something she would say as casual small talk.

"Uh, well, I also dreamt about cuddling a cat once."
"And what kind of cat was it?"
"I forgot. What kind of dreams do you have, Miyagi?"

The conversation veers off-course.

Thinking it might be better to take a leap, I say,

"…You appeared in my dream, Sendai-san."

“Eh?”

Her surprised voice sounds almost silly.

“In the dream, you told me to call you Hazuki.”

I relay a snippet of the dream I had today. I can’t tell her everything, but sharing part of it might reveal Sendai-san’s reaction.

"…Did you call me that?"
"I forgot."
"Do it now. —Shiori."

Her quiet voice slips inside me, softly pressing a tender part of my heart.
She’s sly, using “Shiori” like that in moments like this.
Unfair.

“No way.”

I give a curt response and stand up, as Sendai-san lightly tugs my arm. I tilt toward her, and as if on cue, she leans in toward my face. Her lips almost meet mine, and instinctively, I push her shoulder away.

Sendai-san’s hand releases my arm.
That same hand caresses my neck, and her lips follow, landing on it lightly.
The lukewarm touch crawling along my throat makes my body shiver.

As if in response, her lips part from me, and she softly brushes my cheek with her fingertips, then touches my lips. The gentle sensation is soothing, and I tug on her clothing to pull her close, but she only places a kiss on my cheek before quickly parting.

"I think I’ll take a bath and go to sleep."

She smiles gently as she says this.

"Going to sleep?"
"Yeah. It was busy at work and I’m kind of tired, you know?"

Unlike usual, with a sense of resignation, I tugged on her clothes,

and Sendai-san maintained her smile as she spoke.

"What? Do you want me to kiss you more?"
"No. That's not what I'm thinking. I'll take a bath first."

I do want her to kiss me, but I don't want to be the one to admit it. Still, it's not like I want to be cold towards her. Today, everything feels frustratingly off.

"Alright. Let me know when you're done," Sendai-san says gently.

"Got it."

I tightly grip her clothes, then slowly release them.

Chapter 68

Desires for Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 202

Miyagi dreamed about me.

I don’t know what kind of dream it was, but I never expected Miyagi to have a dream that included me.

I dive onto my bed and curl up into a ball.

Miyagi isn't the type to openly share if she dreams about someone, so when she told me about it, a warmth spreads deep in my chest. Suddenly, the fatigue from my part-time job vanishes as if I didn’t need a bath at all.

"Call me Hazuki, huh."

I mutter the words I’d heard from Miyagi.

I can't ignore it. It's impossible to not be curious. I want to hear more about her dream.

However, even if I ask, she probably won’t share any more details than that. Even if she does, it might not be the truth. At the very least, I want to know if she called me "Hazuki." But since she claimed she forgot, even if she remembered, she probably doesn’t plan to tell me.

Well, she doesn't really call me Hazuki, does she?

I wish she'd call me that in the dream, but I can't imagine Miyagi calling my name, even there. I feel disappointed both by the idea that Miyagi wouldn’t call me "Hazuki" in a dream and by the thought that if she did, it'd still be disheartening. If she’s going to say my name, I'd prefer it be the real me that she refers to as Hazuki.

Placing a hand on the wall that separates Miyagi's room from mine, I think.

Since she's next door, she should come by my room more. It's fine if I go to her room, too. Instead of speaking with the dream version of me, I want her to talk to the real me, in reality.

I was glad when she seemed to be waiting for me in the shared space today. I wish she'd greeted me more cheerfully, but I understand why she couldn't.

The lip balm I gave her for her birthday.

It was a bad idea to retrieve it. More so, the fact that it had rolled away was in itself unfortunate.

Yet, I'm also glad it did, or I might have assumed Miyagi being in the shared space was just a chance encounter, as usual.

Though the lip balm had rolled over, her lips were bare, seemingly with no intention of applying it. She was unusually flustered, out of sorts even. Her being there without reason seemed unlikely, so I asked if she had been waiting for me.

Miyagi denied it.

Still, part of me insists she was indeed waiting.

No matter how many times I ask, she might forever deny it, but my mind continues piecing together facts to conclude she was indeed waiting. Even though I'm using the facts right in front of me to reach conclusions about Miyagi today, my mind twists them to fit my wishes. The way she tugged at my clothes has even more scandalous thoughts trying to mix in with these facts.

With a sigh, I let out a deep breath.

That seemed like she was hinting for a kiss.

But I'm glad I didn't.

If I had, rather than waiting for Miyagi within the boundary of a roommate, I would no longer be able to keep the me that wanted to

pull, draw and capture Miyagi from within that boundary trapped in my heart.

I know I still can't.

I understand that I need to wait for Miyagi.

No good can come from forcing it.

I tap the wall gently, exhaling.

Releasing my hand, I close my eyes, recalling the image of Miyagi from earlier.

Moments like that are rare.

I wish she'd ask for a kiss like that again.

Miyagi, pulling at my clothes, looks adorable, and she seems cute even when she's frowning. I want to see it today, tomorrow, and as many times as I can.

Though she didn't say she'd come, if she visited my part-time workplace, I'd be thrilled and want her to.

During high school, I couldn't visit Miyagi's class during the school festival, so I'd like to attend her college festival too.

My mind becomes fuzzy.

The drowsiness draws in the dreams I want to see.

Lying on the bed, without intending to sleep, time blurs, and various images of Miyagi appear and disappear. As I dream, half-aware it's a dream, I focus on the ideal version of Miyagi until a knock at the door rouses me.

Getting up, I step off the bed.

I walk slowly and open the door to find Miyagi standing there, her hair still wet.

"I just got out of the bath."

Her voice is soft as she looks at me.

Ordinarily, once Miyagi delivered her message, she'd briskly return to her room, but today she doesn't move. Seeing her standing still in front of me, I step closer.

"You smell nice."

"I took a bath."

"Shall I dry your hair for you?"

Taking a damp lock in hand, I gaze at Miyagi, who responds in an irritable tone.

"No, I'll dry it myself."

She swats away my hand touching her hair.

"Hey, Miyagi."
"What?"
"I like this scent, but you should use my shampoo."
"Why should I use Sendai-san's shampoo?"

Piercings or lip balm aren't enough.

I want Miyagi to be filled with things that remind her of me.

It would be nice if, by wearing the same scent, she might suddenly think of me.

I think it intensely, but if I said this aloud, Miyagi would certainly refuse.

"We live together, so using separate shampoos is a waste, isn't it? Let's just share one."

I offer a reason Miyagi might find acceptable.

"…My shampoo's almost out, so I'll use yours once that happens."

Though I thought of providing more reasons, it seems unnecessary. Surprisingly, Miyagi easily accepts my suggestion.

She’s behaving unusually today.

Even though the conversation should be over, she doesn’t return to her room.

If it's still the dream’s influence, I hope she dreams of me again tonight.

“Miyagi.”

I softly call her name and take her hand.

Drawing her closer, I place a kiss on the back of her hand.

I want this kind of life where Miyagi comes to me after her bath.

If that’s what I wish, I should probably stop at just another kiss on the hand. But, there’s groundwork for a relationship beyond roommates between us. Because we’ve been there before, as long as Miyagi permits, we can move forward.

Remaining just roommates is fine.

I want to voice those words but swallow them down.

Kissing her fingertips and brushing the tip with my tongue.

If there’s a division between angel and devil, I surely belong to the devil.

If I kiss her now and pull her toward me, soon Miyagi would be in my room.

Looking up, I meet Miyagi’s gaze, irritation reflecting in her eyes.

When I release her hand, she grabs onto my clothes.

If I didn't kiss her, I’d see this side of Miyagi more often. Continuing this, she might ask for a kiss and maybe more.

"I’m going to take a bath."

I whisper, planting a kiss on her cheek.

I don’t think I’m a very good person today.

Following my silly desires, I gradually release the hand grasping my clothes.

"Goodnight."

I say, unsure if Miyagi will sleep soon, and her grumpy "Goodnight" returns.

Desires for Miyagi (II)

Part 203

"Sendai-chan, are you in financial trouble?"

As I placed a café latte on the table, Noto-senpai made a rather impolite remark.

"No, I'm not."

She was the senpai who introduced me to a tutoring job. Our interactions were mostly limited to brief greetings, but now, at this café where I've taken up a new part-time job, it's become customary for us to engage in slightly impertinent conversations.

"So, are you spending it on some bad guy or girl?"

Noto-senpai frowned as she made yet another rude comment. She's a regular at this café, often trapping the staff in trivial conversations, and it's difficult to gauge the line between her jokes and serious statements.

"That's not it, either."
"I thought so. You don't seem like the type to be easily deceived."
"What exactly are you investigating?"
"If you need money enough to juggle multiple jobs, maybe I can introduce you to another tutoring gig. This café job is only till the school festival, right?"

With that, Noto-senpai took a sip of her café latte and asked, "What do you think?" It seemed she was genuinely offering to help me find another tutoring position.

"I appreciate the offer, but after this job, there's something I want to do."

I offered a convenient excuse.

"If I asked what that was, would Sendai-chan tell me?"
"It's a secret."

I know that considering the pay, it would be better to take on more tutoring jobs than café work. But even if I did, Miyagi and I wouldn't be able to work together, nor could I invite Miyagi over. Besides, Miyagi appears to have a strong aversion to me tutoring. If I'm going to take on more work, I'd prefer something that wouldn't upset her as much.

Though, right now, she's in a bad mood for reasons unrelated to work.

"Then maybe I should find someone who isn't Sendai-chan."

Listening to Noto-senpai's voice, unsure if she was convinced or not, I couldn't help but think of Miyagi's perpetually displeased face ever since that day I picked up the lip balm.

Since then, it's been about ten days, and Miyagi has neither demanded a kiss nor permitted me to kiss her. If anything, her mood has only worsened.

"I'm sure you will even if I don't tell you, but please, take your time."

I sighed internally at the thought of Miyagi and addressed Noto-senpai instead.

"Sendai-chan, you're so cold. Mio would indulge me in conversation a lot more."

Noto-senpai ruffled her long hair while sipping her café latte.

Entertaining regular customers is somewhat part of the job here. Even if a conversation drags on a bit, the manager won't chastise us. But if the talk continues endlessly, we have to draw the line somewhere.

I smiled at senpai.

"This isn't the kind of place where the staff and customers chit-chat."

I wish it was Miyagi.
It's not that I don't want to talk to Noto-senpai, but if someone's going to urge me to chat more, I want it to be Miyagi.

Things don’t go the way I want them to.
I shouldn’t have done anything unnecessary.

Just because a stray cat was slightly tamed, it wouldn’t comply with commands like ‘give me your paw’ or ‘shake hands.’ Miyagi would never act according to my whims. I can’t help but feel disappointed in myself for taking the easy way out.

"It’s like that kind of place, isn’t it? I came here because Mio invited me."

Hearing Noto-senpai’s voice, I erase the image of Miyagi’s annoyed face from my mind.

"What did Mio do?"
"I was reading a book at a nearby park when high schooler Mio approached me, saying, 'If you’re going to read, why not do it at the café over there?'"
"…That sounds like Mio."

Considering her sociable nature, Mio would have no qualms about approaching strangers and probably wouldn’t hesitate to bring customers into the café. Despite Noto-senpai’s sharp look—an accurate description would be a habit of furrowing her brows when something irks her—Mio likely wouldn’t be deterred.

"Thanks to that, I get to drink delicious café lattes now."

With that, Noto-senpai gulped down her café latte. Noticing she still seemed eager to chat, I seized the chance to excuse myself and return to work without waiting for a natural break in conversation. No matter how regular a customer she might be, I can’t attend to her forever.

Saturday crowds come in waves, and cafés are busy on this day. There’s room now, but it might not remain that way indefinitely. I scanned the café.

She should stop by.

I’d mentioned to Miyagi to come, but she wasn’t there. I knew she wouldn’t come. The hours of my afternoon shift slipped away, and as night fell, Mio arrived, signaling my shift’s end.

“Hazuki-chan, can you cover for someone tomorrow? One of us has an urgent matter and needs to take the day off.”

As I was about to leave, the manager called out.

"Sure."
"Then, please start at three."
"Got it."

Missing a day or two of free time for extra work doesn’t bother me. It means more pay, which is something I’m grateful for.

Yet, I can’t be too happy when I think of Miyagi.

Not only do I want to spend time with her, but also because any talk of my part-time job seems to worsen her mood. Plus, I finished work late today, and didn’t even manage to inform her in time.

I took the train and got off at the usual station.
I hurried through the route where I often encountered Mike-chan, making my way home.
Up the stairs to the third floor, and I opened the front door.
After removing my shoes, I headed to the shared space, but Miyagi wasn’t there.
I knocked on the door to her room.

Knock, knock.

The door opened after my second knock, and Miyagi emerged looking visibly irritated.

"I'm home."
"…Welcome back. You’re late today."

In a slightly low voice, Miyagi commented while eyeing my ear.

"It was busy. Also, I’m sorry, but I have to work tomorrow."
"Why are you apologizing?"
"I’m not sure."
"You apologize, but still go to work, so there's no need to say sorry."

Miyagi lightly tapped my foot.
Her gaze remained fixated on my ear.

"Do you want to touch my earrings?"

When I asked softly, a firm answer came back.

"Not really."
"You can if you'd like."
"I didn't say I wanted to."
"But I want to touch you, Miyagi."

When I reached out to cup her cheek, she promptly peeled my hand away before our faces could draw closer. It seemed she wasn't going to allow anything leading to a kiss.
I'd like to discard the silly ulterior motives from that day and erase them from the past.

I don't mind if she doesn't ask for a kiss, but I wish she'd let me kiss her.

I wasn't made for this kind of standoff.
Miyagi's not likely to give in before me anyway.

"Because it's a penalty game."

Miyagi stated it as if it were obvious.

"Fine, but what are you going to make me do?"
"Tomorrow, don't go to work."

She gave my foot another gentle nudge.
It didn't hurt, but it conveyed her discontent.

"That's impossible."
"I know. I was just saying it."
"Then, what do you actually want for this so-called penalty game?"
"You can go to work, but from now on, you have to do exactly what I say."
"As I've said before, as long as it's within reason."

Her usual strong kicks are absent, and she recoils from my touch.

It seems inevitable that this penalty game will be troublesome.
Evidence of this lies in the fact that Miyagi doesn't even acknowledge my words; instead, she simply says, "Come inside."

Desires for Miyagi (III)

Part 204

I step into the room, taking a deep breath before exhaling. My heart's racing, like when I walk too quickly, and I try to calm it down. Although I've entered this room countless times, today feels a bit different with Miyagi's demeanor, making me slightly tense.

"Stand there and take off your clothes," Miyagi instructs flatly, pointing to a spot in front of the bed.

"You mean this?" I ask, tugging at my cardigan while looking at Miyagi beside me.

"The T-shirt and the skirt too."

"Not just the cardigan and T-shirt?"

I reflexively ask for clarification. I expected her to mean the cardigan and the T-shirt underneath it, but I didn't think it included the skirt as well.

"Yes, I said the skirt too."

"So, you want me down to my underwear?"

"If there's any other clothing, you should let me know."

"...There isn't. Should I turn off the lights?"

"No. Hurry up and stand there and take off your clothes," Miyagi says quietly. The curtains are closed, so no one can see in from outside. The room isn't too cold or too warm. However, even so, I can't just say, "Sure" and take off my clothes easily. I've taken off my shirt in front of Miyagi before, but the mention of the skirt makes me hesitate.

This isn't a particularly good penalty game.

I slowly exhale and look at Miyagi. She doesn't seem to be joking

about stripping.

"Aren't you going to undress, Miyagi?"

"It's your penalty game, Sendai-san, so obviously I'm not stripping."

"But it's embarrassing if it's just me."

"It's a penalty game, so a little embarrassment is just right."

I didn't notify her that I'd be late and, though aware she wanted a kiss, I didn't grant it. While I can think of reasons Miyagi might be upset, neither seems severe enough to warrant being asked to strip.

"Sendai-san," Miyagi speaks without hiding her irritation and looks at me. Until the penalty game concludes, I doubt her mood will improve.

It's not like I'm taking everything off.

I tell myself as I stand in front of the bed.

"Here is fine, right?"

"Yes."

"Just to be clear, why do I need to strip? There's a rule about maintaining common decency during penalty games."

"We're not doing anything that requires the lights to be off, so it's fine."

Even though I hear Miyagi's words, I still have no clue what she's planning to do.

It's something I sometimes dream about.

Being asked to undress, I fleetingly wonder if maybe it could be... except Miyagi would usually turn off the lights for such things, and in her current mood, she wouldn't even allow a kiss, much less anything else.

"So what kind of things require the lights to be out?"

"What you're thinking. We're not doing that, so hurry and undress."

Well, of course not.

There's no way a penalty game would be that. I take off my cardigan, fold it neatly, and place it on the floor.

Miyagi is watching me intently. Her gaze is sharp and piercing, showing no signs of reducing its intensity. It’s as though she hasn’t even considered the discomfort of being observed. She could avert her gaze or even blink, but it seems as if that feature has malfunctioned in her as she continues to stare at me without reprieve.

With a sigh, I grip the hem of my T-shirt.

"...What if I don’t?"

What would happen if I refused to comply with the penalty game? I have the right to at least ask that.

"I'd kick you out and never let you back in."

I don't know if Miyagi understands how significant that would be to me, but she hits right where it would hurt the most to hear.

"Could you at least avert your eyes a bit?"

"Come on, Sendai-san, you don’t get embarrassed."

Miyagi's comment is terribly impolite. I do experience embarrassment, after all.

But shedding my clothes could improve her mood, and from the moment I set foot in this room, saying no didn’t feel like an option. Miyagi’s words leave me no room for any choice. All options stripped away, I can only progress towards the predetermined outcome, unable to resist.

Something's clearly wrong. I know this is irrational, but like water flowing downhill, I find myself moving in the direction Miyagi desires.

"Like I said earlier, even I get embarrassed," I insist as I pull off my

T-shirt, then slide off my skirt, laying them on the floor.

The lights are glaring, and Miyagi, fully dressed, continues to observe me. Standing here unclothed while she remains clothed is unsettling. She approaches slowly and pulls back the blanket.

"Sit," comes her order, resonating in my head. I'm curious about the real nature of this penalty game.

“Sendai-san,” she whispers, placing her hand against my neck.

Her touch isn't warm or cold, yet its presence is distinctly Miyagi’s. Though I've felt her warmth countless times, my neck becomes stiff as if it’s the first time I’m experiencing it, and I become acutely aware of her hand.

With her fingers applying pressure, I lower myself onto the bed. Just the absence of a covering makes my body feel vulnerable.

Her hand slides from my neck down to my shoulder, gently caressing it. As I meet her gaze, she tugs my bra strap.

"This too, take it off."

Before I can respond, she’s pulling down the straps, allowing it to fall from my shoulder.

"I took off my clothes, so isn't the penalty game over?"

"It hasn't even started yet. This is just preparation. I'm taking it off."

Miyagi reaches behind as though embracing me, but instead, she deftly unhooks my bra. With nothing to keep it in place, the garment easily loses its function, and I instinctively cover myself with my hands.

"Hold on, Miyagi. Wasn't it just the clothes?"

"Move your hands."

Her voice falls with an irritated tone. She doesn't seem inclined to answer my question. I suppose I could remove my hands, but at least let me prepare myself mentally.

"Can I have a moment?"

"No."

Her immediate response prompts a quiet sigh from me.

"Then can you step back a bit?"

I lightly tap my toe against Miyagi's foot, creating a bit of distance. I slowly lower my hands and remove my bra. As I exhale softly, she snatches it, placing it on top of the clothes I've taken off.

With each piece of clothing removed, Miyagi's gaze becomes more intense. I can clearly feel her focus on my chest now.

"You're staring too much."

I voice my complaint, to which she calmly responds.

"Sendai-san, you're beautiful—your face and your body."

Her unexpected compliment catches me off guard.

For Miyagi to say something flattering about me is rare. I worry she might have bumped her head somewhere. But then again, if she were thinking clearly, she wouldn't demand someone strip as a punishment in the first place. Yet, hearing such words from her in this unorthodox situation makes it even harder to meet her eyes.

"Thanks, I guess. But getting stared at too much is embarrassing," I say, my cheeks growing warm. They're probably turning red.

"You didn't message me, and you came home late, so it's your own fault, Sendai-san. If you say you're not going to work at your part-time job tomorrow, I'll stop," Miyagi said.

"I'll go to work," I replied.

"Then let's continue. Lie down on the bed."

"I thought you said we wouldn't do anything that requires turning the lights off?"

"We're not, so just listen to what I say."

Miyagi moved closer, touching my ear. Her fingertips gently brushed the earring, then withdrew.

I can't figure out what she's thinking, but there's nothing I can do but follow her lead. Resistance would be pointless.

As I slowly lie down, Miyagi climbs onto the bed, straddling me around my abdomen. Her fingers once again graze my earring, her face nearing my neck. Then, she bites down.

Despite her recent refusal to even let me initiate a kiss, here Miyagi was, biting down without hesitation, and my heart started racing.

The warmth emanating from her makes me feel a strange mixture of happiness and pain.

Not biting my ear was probably a small concession on Miyagi's part, but with her teeth so powerfully clamped on my neck, the pain was intense, the heat palpable, almost causing me to forget to breathe. I clutch at her shoulders, finding slight relief from the pain of her teeth sinking into my skin.

"Miyagi, didn't you say we weren't going to do anything?"

All I really wanted was a kiss, not to get bitten. It was over in a flash and likely wouldn't leave a mark, but it caught me off guard.

"I never said we wouldn't do anything, and even if I did, considering what we usually do, this is nothing."

"Aren't you being a bit too arbitrary?"

"Just learning from you, Sendai-san."

She said lightly, then leaned in again.

Her lips touch beneath my collarbone—pressing down, sucking hard. They detach momentarily, shift slightly, then apply pressure and suck again.

The lips move downward from below my collarbone to the upper part of my chest, lingering briefly before moving to a new area. The process is repeated again and again.

Miyagi's lips deliver small pinpricks of pain, like sugar cubes. Their edges jab against me, the sharp pain melding with her warmth, dissolving into my bloodstream and circulating through my body. The sensation her lips leave behind remains sweet, painful, yet strangely addictive. In this strange situation, my sense of what's normal begins to slip.

As her lips descend toward my ribcage, pressing and sucking before her teeth graze the skin, my body instinctively jerks. Her bite is firm enough to hit bone. I clutch the sheets tightly as her lips withdraw, and I feel only pain, piercing into my brain instead of the sweet warmth. Her lips relocate, indulging me with various kinds of discomfort—sucking and biting along the way.

The heat transferring from Miyagi sears my skin, my senses. My breath comes shallow, so I breathe deep to anchor myself, avoiding drifting towards the urge to pull Miyagi in, undress her, and steal away her warmth.

I sense no ulterior motive in Miyagi's actions beyond marking me with her touch. It feels like she's executing a task, as if adhering to a set order void of emotional baggage.

The red marks multiply, consuming me and imprinting Miyagi into my skin.

"Miyagi," I call as she leaves another mark near my stomach, but she does not respond.

She seems so intent on what she's doing, as if it were necessary, marking my body with her lips before withdrawing. It's fine; she can mark me, but if it goes on too long, that's an issue.

"What's your purpose for doing this?" I tug lightly at her hair and ask, causing her to lift her head.

"I just want to leave marks."

"But they'll fade soon enough."

"I know, but I still want to leave them."

"Why?" I ask, perplexed.

Miyagi frowns, lightly touching her plumeria earring while staring at me.

"...So you don't forget to contact me if you're going to be late, like we agreed. With this many marks, you won't forget, right?"

After speaking, Miyagi moved her fingers from the earring to one of the marks under my collarbone.

"Didn't you say your earrings were a reminder for that? That's why you got them, right?"

"Sendai-san, I don't want you promising by the earrings if you're going to keep breaking them for your job shifts. Don't make promises on the earrings that you have no intention of keeping," Miyagi replied in her most displeased tone of the day.

"What about my ears then? I've given them to you. We could make more promises than just sharing a whole cake together."

"Your ears alone are not enough. Not only your ears, but all of you belongs to me, and I'll place my promise marks wherever I like."

All of me belongs to her.

These words slam against my chest, and my heart races at a pace I can't control. I try to lean in closer to see Miyagi's face, but her teeth press firmly against my collarbone, keeping me pinned to the bed.

"If you break our promise again, I'll mark you like this all over again."

Miyagi strokes my collarbone, her fingers sliding slowly. I fully realize that those fingers are tracing the contours of the marks she made.

One by one, her fingers glide over the red marks, identifying each one. Despite her clinical touch, it's impossible not to react.

Miyagi isn't intending to stir up my emotions, but her touch sends ripples through me. Miyagi's voice—the one that claimed, "All of you belongs to me"—lingers in my mind, even more powerful than the touch of her lips, stirring something deep inside me.

"Miyagi."

I call her as she inspects the marks on my chest. She doesn't reply, but the waves in my chest only grow stronger.

"Hey, Miyagi. Stop already."

My breathing turns shallow again. The word "lust" surfaces in my mind. The murky feelings bubbling up inside me could be called that—something simmering hot and uncontrolled, rising from deep within.

These feelings are dangerous, eroding my reason like candy dissolving in water, filling me with the urge to reach out and touch Miyagi.

Right now, my desires are reckless and insincere. They don't match with Miyagi's intentions, and I know I should suppress them, but I want her to feel the same way.

"Please, just stop."

I grab Miyagi’s hand that was tracing over the marks. If this continues, I'll end up wanting her to touch not just where she marked, but everywhere.

"I don’t like you telling me to stop, Sendai-san. You’ve always done what I say, so follow my lead today too, and just stay still."

Miyagi bites my shoulder, her teeth sinking into my skin. The sharp pain makes me let go. Her fingers confirm the mark above my chest. They lightly brush over it, and slide along to the next. Despite being treated like a medical examination, my body responds to each touch of Miyagi’s fingers.

This is bad, I think.

My breathing grows erratic. Even with Miyagi's innocent intentions, it’s becoming unbearable. Though I understand she's tracing the marks, my body longs for even more, unable to confine its unchaste desires.

Her fingertips brushed over the bulge, and I could feel her gaze

burning into me. Yet, Miyagi avoided touching the very place I wanted her to touch the most.

Though I didn't want to be aware, my nerves gathered at the center of my chest, visibly reacting even to Miyagi's eyes.

I wished she would turn off the lights. The state of my chest reflected in Miyagi's gaze seemed to clearly convey my desire for her touch.

I didn't want to be seen.

If Miyagi and I wanted the same thing, it would be fine. But in the midst of this disparity, it felt unfair for my feelings to be laid bare while hers remained unknown. I grasped Miyagi's hand again.

"Don't move," she said in a dissatisfied tone.

"It's dangerous if this continues. This is enough, right?"

"No. Let go."

Her words were firm, so I release her hand. My reason was steadily melting away, and her fingers gliding over my skin felt too good.

If she would only touch the red marks, then I wanted her to make more marks.

No. I shouldn't think like that.

But even as I tell myself no, my body moves forward unguided. I couldn't stop it nor refrain from waiting for her fingers to touch beyond those marks.

"Miyagi," I called out, my voice barely a whisper.

Her fingers skim over the place I wanted her to touch, and then her lips were on my chest, leaving another mark. Each small mark extended its roots, drawing Miyagi's heat and breath deep within me. Despite being just a bruise, a mark no different from an injury, they transformed me, making me think of nothing else but her.

They're not like the piercings that stay on forever.

It's because the marks would disappear that I want Miyagi.

I want Miyagi to make it so that they don't disappear.

“Miyagi…”

I embrace her head.

This is no good. I want her to touch me properly.

“Let go, Sendai-san.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to stop now.”

Saying this, Miyagi forcibly distanced herself and lifted her head.

“That’s not fair,” I protested, tugging her closer by the hem of her clothes.

I press my lips to her neck and run my tongue across her skin.

I knew she had no intention of things going this way, but it felt unjust for her to touch me as she pleased and then decide when it was over.

“Don’t, Sendai-san,” Miyagi said, gently pushing against my forehead. Subdued by her firm voice, I reluctantly withdrew my lips, and she sits upright.

“Sorry.”

I didn’t truly think I needed to apologize, but I wanted her to let me touch her more, so I did.

I tug at her clothes and rise slightly. As I leaned in for a kiss, her voice came out annoyingly displeased.

“If you want a kiss, say it properly, instead of apologizing.”

Miyagi said, pushing my shoulder with an unabashedly displeased expression.

“I want to kiss you, Miyagi. Please let me.”

I had hoped she would be the one asking me for it, yet here I was, seeking it from her. How did it come to this? As I pondered, there was nothing else I could do.

Gently brushing her lips with my fingertips, I murmured, “Shiori,” calling her name. Our eyes met, and when I asked, “Is it okay?” Miyagi quietly closed her eyes.

I moved in closer so she wouldn’t escape, lightly meeting her lips. The warmth, the softness, felt so good. Just as when she had marked my body, I pulled back ever so slightly, then kissed her again. I Repeatedly kissed her over and over, as if making up for lost time. I nibbled her lips like biting into a peach, causing Miyagi to push against my shoulder.

“Not enough. Shiori, kiss me.”

Mimicking what she had done in the past, I tugged at her clothes, and she stroked my cheek. When I closed my eyes, our lips met. However, the kiss was brief, and then her small voice reached me.

“...Hazuki,”

The grip on her clothes loosened.

“Eh? Just now—”

An auditory hallucination.

No, it wasn’t.

At the moment our lips parted, a voice so faint it could have gone unnoticed, but I certainly heard it. The heat simmering deep within me surged and then faded.

One more time.

I wanted to hear it one more time.

“Shiori—”

Before I could finish, a blanket enveloped my head, and everything

went dark. I tried to pull the blanket off, but Miyagi caught me with it and held me close.

“Sendai-san.”

She said, reverting to the familiar way she called me.

“I know I’m selfish.”

Holding me along with the blanket, Miyagi continued speaking in a quiet voice.

“But you started a new job without telling me…”

From the world beyond the blanket barrier, her voice seeped in, as if it might disappear into the confines of the bedding, so I listened intently making sure not to miss a word.

“You show up in my dreams out of nowhere, doing weird things and then ignoring me, even when you know what I want, and everything just feels out of sync.”

Weird things?

Although muffled by the blanket, I hadn’t misheard. Miyagi had indeed said “weird things.” I knew she had dreams, but not that they involved strange occurrences.

Could it be…

“…It’s frustrating. Take responsibility, Sendai-san, and do something about it.”

Before I could properly digest her words, there was a gentle thud on the blanket, and I called out “Shiori.” When she responded, “Miyagi,” it came back clear from the other side, correcting me.

“—Miyagi. What should I do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tell me. I’ll do something if I can.”

“I don’t really know… I just don’t like an empty house.”

Miyagi mumbled softly as the hand restraining the blanket loosened. I peered out to look at her.

“There might be times I’m a little late, but I’ll always come back. You’re not alone, Miyagi.”

I assured her as I would a small child and pressed a kiss to her lips. But, she didn’t call me Hazuki again.

Miyagi observed me silently, then got off the bed. As she picked up my clothes and placed them on the bed, she turned her back.

“Put those on,” she said in a subdued voice.

I didn’t feel like remaining unclothed, so I dressed myself as she’d instructed. Although earlier she had watched me undress so intently, now she wouldn’t even glance my way.

That, too, displeased me. I wished she would look, even just a little.

Feeling irritated by my own fickleness, I announced, “I’m dressed,” only to receive a curt reply to return to my room.

“And the penalty game?”

“It’s over.”

With that, Miyagi took my hand and led me out of the room. Standing in the shared space, just before the door shut, I called out to her.

“Miyagi. If you dislike being home alone, come visit the café tomorrow. Utsunomiya can join you too.”

Despite knowing she likely wouldn’t come, I had to say it.

“...I’ll think about it.”

The door inched closed, and I yanked on Miyagi’s clothes.

“I want to kiss you one more time.”

I didn’t hear a refusal.

As I drew near, Miyagi closed her eyes, and so, I gently kissed her again.

Chapter 69

Sendai-san That's Not Mine (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 205

Neither a "I'm home" nor a "Welcome back," but rather a "Welcome."

The first words Sendai-san spoke felt uncomfortable, making me wish to leave even before the cake arrived. However, since I'm not here alone, I can't just get up and leave before it arrives.

“Shiori, Sendai-san really suits the uniform. Is that a café apron? I really like those.”

The apron Sendai-san wears, which is part of her work uniform and wraps around her waist downwards, does look quite stylish. Although, its stylishness adds to my discomfort.

This isn't the Sendai-san that I know.

Wanting to avoid being alone at home, I had invited Maika to visit Sendai-san’s part-time job. But now, I wish I hadn't come. Even if being alone at home might have been boring, lonely, or unbearable, it might have been better than this.

“I thought about giving you one of those for your birthday—if next year is okay.”

I directed my voice towards Maika, who was looking at a waiter at the neighboring table.

“Since this year’s already passed, right?”
“...Christmas could work too.”

When I murmured that, Maika responded cheerfully.

“Oh, Christmas is great. We haven’t done it before, but why not exchange gifts this year?”

In high school, while we celebrated birthdays with friends, we hadn’t exchanged chocolates or presents for Valentine's or Christmas.

I had no interest in such things and considered indulging in events as a dull ritual. I believed I would always stay that way, but I was mistaken.

Ever since Sendai-san brought chocolates on Valentine's Day and gave me presents on Christmas, I couldn't remain the same me. Somewhere inside me, in an unseen place, has been subtly changed by Sendai-san.

“Would you like an apron for a Christmas present, Maika?”
“Well, if it’s for home use, one that covers up to the chest would keep my clothes cleaner.”

After saying this, Maika hummed, deep in thought.

“It doesn’t have to be an apron. If there’s something you want, just let me know.”
“Thanks. I’ll think about it. You too, Shiori—think about what you want for a Christmas present.”
“Sure.”

While we talked about something still far off in the midst of winter, we observed the café, which had about two-thirds of its seats occupied in the evening.

The café, neither large nor small, was stylish but not particularly unique. With what appeared to be frequent patrons engaging in chatter with the staff, the atmosphere was rather laid-back.

I glanced at the table near the counter.
Sendai-san was talking to a slightly intimidating-looking customer.
Though I couldn’t hear their conversation, they seemed familiar with each other.
She lingered there longer than at other tables.

“Sendai-san seems really suited for customer service.”

I hear Maika commenting appreciatively.

“She hasn’t even been working for a month yet she already seems like she’s been here for a year.”
“Yeah. She’s really fitting in well.”

I replied with a smile and then turned my gaze towards the window.
Indeed, I should have stayed home.
This version of Sendai-san here will never be mine.

What does Sendai-san do during the times I don't know about?

It intrigues me, yet knowing wouldn’t change anything. Even now, as I see a Sendai-san I wasn’t aware of, there’s nothing I can do. I can only watch as she talks with a woman I don’t know.

I sip water from a cute glass set on the table.
Maika began talking about the latest manga she bought, to which I nodded in agreement.
After a while, I heard Sendai-san’s formal voice, and I looked at her apron.

“Thank you for waiting.”

Cheesecake, shortcake, some tea, and coffee.
Sendai-san set them down on the table.

“You really look like a staff member!”

Maika remarked happily, looking at Sendai-san.

“That’s because I am a staff member.”
“The person sitting near the counter, are they a regular?”

Maika asked about the person I had been curious about.

“They are a regular, yes, but also a senior of mine. They introduced me to my tutoring job.”

A person deeply connected to Sendai-san.
The fact that such a person is a regular at Sendai-san’s workplace weighs heavily on me before I even take a bite of the cake.

“I see.”

Feeling uneasy as I listened to their conversation, I glanced around

the café again, but no one seemed bothered by the staff mingling with customers. Sendai-san didn't seem to mind spending a long time at one table either.

"Miyagi."

She suddenly called my name, so I responded while looking at the cheesecake.

"What?"
"I've been thinking for a while, that lip balm suits you."

"...You're saying that because you picked it out."

I had contemplated until the moment I left the house whether to wear the lip balm Sendai-san had given me. I wore it not for her to see, but because I was meeting Maika. I often wear lip balm at university, so it'd be strange not to wear it only on my day off. That's the only reason, so I don't need Sendai-san's compliments.

"Busted."

Sendai-san chuckled softly.
Perhaps she didn't mind what happened yesterday, as she seemed like her usual self since morning.

What I did yesterday was terrible and not something one should do to a roommate. Given that, Sendai-san has every right to be upset, yet for some reason, she's in a good mood. Perhaps she's only teasing me, but to have enough composure to compliment my lip color is noteworthy.

However, unlike Sendai-san, I couldn't look at her face straight on since morning. Once I do, memories of yesterday flood in.

Her body.
Those red marks I left all over.
They're seared into my mind.
And the things that I said, which I shouldn't have.

I almost let out a sigh but swallowed it down.
I wish Sendai-san would leave already, yet she lingers on.

"Oh right, Utsunomiya, I'm thinking of going to your school festival

—could you show me around?”

Unexpected words interrupted my stare-down with the cheesecake, prompting me to finally look at Sendai-san’s face, which I hadn’t dared to do for a while.

“Ah, just what we were talking about—Shiori and I were thinking of inviting you to the festival,” Maika answered happily.

She wasn't wrong, as Maika did say we should invite Sendai-san to the school festival. But I hadn’t clearly said “yes.”

—Then again, I hadn’t said “no” either.

“Is that so? Then I’ll come visit—looking forward to the tour.”

Sendai-san’s lively voice makes me think how unfair it is.
She hadn’t said a word to me about wanting to go to the festival.

Probably because she knows if she says it to me, I would respond with, “Don’t come.” And if she tells Maika, she’d undoubtedly say, “Please come.”

Truly, Sendai-san plays unfair.

“Leave it to us. Right, Shiori?”

Naturally, Maika replied and looked at me.

“Ah, yeah.”

I don’t want that.
Please don’t come.
But, I can’t say that in front of Maika.

"Alright then."

Sendai-san smiled brightly before moving on to another table. I waited until she was completely out of sight before taking a bite of the cheesecake and letting out a heavy sigh.

"What's up with that end-of-the-world sigh?" Maika asked.

"...I wish I knew how to erase someone’s memory," I replied,

pressing my forehead, then taking a sip of tea.

"That's creepy. Did something happen? You suddenly texted about going to see Sendai-san at work today," Maika probed.

"Nothing happened," I said.

"Isn't it scarier to want to erase memories when nothing's wrong?" Maika pushed further.

"Well, yeah," I admitted.

What I really wanted to erase was Sendai-san's memory of yesterday, but I couldn't tell Maika that.

Another sigh escaped my lips.

Though Sendai-san acted as if nothing happened, what occurred and what was said yesterday had to linger in her memory. While the actions themselves might be irreversible, the things I said never needed to be said at all, and I wish I could erase them from her memory. Ideally, I'd also erase today's mention of the school festival.

"Oh, I get it. You must have fought with Sendai-san again, right? ...Or maybe not, since you wouldn't come to her workplace if you had," Maika guessed.

"Yeah, exactly."

I looked toward where Sendai-san was taking orders at another table. The uniform suited her, and her voice, slightly formal, was beautiful.

The version of her who seems different wraps my heart in gray clouds.

I wished to erase her memories but not the marks I left yesterday. On the contrary, they felt insufficient.

Red marks hidden beneath her uniform.

Had I covered her body with more of them, perhaps I could have made those internal clouds a bit smaller.

I sliced a generous piece of cheesecake with my fork, then stabbed it forcefully.

Indeed, I shouldn’t have come.

I ate the cheesecake off the fork and exhaled softly.

Sendai-san That's Not Mine (II)

Part 206

"If you don't like being home alone, why not come over?"

Sendai-san had mentioned that, so I went to her workplace. But when I got back home, I was alone again. Even if I waited for an hour or two, she wouldn't return, and having been with Maika until just a short while ago only made the loneliness feel sharper.

"Even if I go over, it's the same, isn't it?"

Lying on the bed, I was tempted to toss the black cat plush I was holding towards the door, then stopped myself. The black cat wasn't at fault. The blame lay with Sendai-san, who didn't come home early. Working part-time on a Sunday makes me want to take my frustrations out on the plush.

I rolled onto my side, placing the black cat on my stomach.

It's not that I've eaten too much or that I'm starving, but there's a sense of dissatisfaction. A vague irritation coils within me.

Yesterday, Sendai-san was here on this very bed, yet today she's absent. There's only my own scent and body warmth—there's not even a trace of her now. For such a small thing, just that much, and Sunday feels like the worst.

I really should've just not gone to her workplace.

I'm curious about what kind of person that senior she was chatting with is. I'm curious about what kind of person the shopkeeper she was smiling with is.

From one or two points of curiosity, questions start to merge—what were they talking about? Do they meet outside that café too? All these stupid questions keep growing. I'm curious about the face Sendai-san shows while working on days other than today, and I'm also bothered by how she looks at me as just one of many people.

I sigh, tugging at the black cat's tail. Whether she's here or not, Sendai-san makes me irritated.

I pull the covers over myself and close my eyes. Yet, I can't erase Sendai-san from my mind, curling up into a small ball. In the darkness I've created within the bed, after five or ten minutes, I hear a soft knock, knock.

"I'm home."

Following the sound of the knock, I hear Sendai-san's voice. I slowly sit up and get off the bed. After returning the black cat to the bookshelf and taking a breath, I open the door and say "Welcome back" in a small voice, to which Sendai-san responds with a smile.

"I'm going to have some orange juice. Would you like something too, Miyagi?"
"I'll have some."
"What would you like?"
"The same as you, Sendai-san."
"Do you want to come over here? Or should I bring it over?"
"Bring it here."
"Alright, just wait a moment."

Saying that, Sendai-san turned her back to me, and I closed the door. In less than five minutes, the door was knocked on again, and I let Sendai-san into the room. She set two glasses filled with orange juice on the table and sat beside me.

Using the bed as a backrest, we both drank our orange juice side by side.

"Did you take off your lip balm?"

Sendai-san asked in her usual voice, reserved only for us.

"Yeah, I did."
"It looked good on you, though."

Her gentle tone does not reveal what she's thinking. I place my half-empty glass of orange juice down and look at Sendai-san. But even looking at her, I can't discern what she's thinking, as she just continues to smile quietly.

"I was happy that you came today, Miyagi. If you don't want to come alone, it's fine to come with Utsunomiya like today, so please visit again."
"Maika said she wanted to see you working, so I just went with her. I won’t go anymore since the school festival is soon, and you’ll be done with your part-time job anyway, right?"
"Well, that's true."

Sendai-san said lightly, taking a sip of her orange juice. Her lips touched the glass, the orange liquid inside diminished, and her throat moved. I could only trace the path of the orange juice; beyond that lay an unseen passage.

The glass, now reduced by a third of its contents, was placed back on the table. Wanting to touch the vanished orange juice, I began to reach towards the area below Sendai-san's throat, somewhere between her collarbones, but stopped myself.

"Honestly, I think mentioning the school festival was a bit sneaky."

I grip the hem of Sendai-san's skirt and give it a tug.

"Sneaky? What's sneaky about it?"
"You thought if you told Maika, she'd say you should come. So instead of asking me, you told her about the school festival, right?"
"That's right. I don't want you to tell me not to come."

With that, Sendai-san reached out and attempted to touch the hand holding her skirt.

"…That's disturbingly honest."

I pulled back my hand before she could catch it.

"Isn't that harsh? Normally, people would be happy about honesty."
"I'm not happy. Suddenly being honest is suspicious and unsettling. ...What are you plotting?"
"Plotting? If I'm not honest with you, Miyagi, you won't let me do anything. That's all."

She spoke quietly and turned her body towards me. Her gaze was intense, and I couldn't continue looking at her, so I averted my eyes.

"What do you mean?"

I murmured. In response, Sendai-san brushed her fingers over my earring.

"You won't let me kiss you, or touch you. I don't like that."

Her fingers, having trailed over the earring, now touched my lips. Her warmth approached, and she whispered in my ear.

"I want to kiss you, Miyagi."
"We're not talking about that right now."

I pushed against Sendai-san's body, distancing her warmth.

"Even if we're not talking about it, I suddenly wanted to."
"Just because you say whatever doesn't mean it's okay."
"If you would say it, Miyagi, then I wouldn't need to, but you won't say it, will you?"
"I don't need to."
"I figured you'd say that. That's why I'm the one saying it. Give me a kiss, Miyagi."

Sendai-san says such things unabashedly. I don't understand how she can be so straightforward in expressing her desires. She speaks with a calm voice as if it were the most natural thing, pulling me by the arm. Yet, she doesn't push further, waiting for my next words.

It's rare for her to force anything upon me.

"Miyagi, just say it's fine."

With a hint of strain in her voice, she tightened her grip on my arm. I removed her hand and looked at her.

"Kissing isn't what I want."
"Then what do you want?"
"I want to make sure."

I tugged at the knit covering Sendai-san's upper body.

"…Make sure of what?"
"To see if the mark I left yesterday is still there."

The red marks covering her upper body.

They remain on Sendai-san even when she assumes a form unknown to me, while neither the senior at her university nor the people at her workplace can see them.

Even if she's somewhere unknown to me, it's something only I know.

I want to confirm that even now, after her shift is over, it's still there.

"I wasn't late enough for any kind of penalty game."
"It's not a penalty game, so if you don't like it, I won't look."

When I said that, Sendai-san replied, "Do whatever you like."

Sendai-san That's Not Mine (III)

Part 207

"So, what am I supposed to do?"

Her quiet voice reminded me of what I had done yesterday, making my heart race. Along with that, I also recalled the things I wished I could erase from Sendai-san's memory. My grip on her clothes tightened.

I only said what I did because Sendai-san was taking forever to come back. Even if I regret it, I can't change anything now, so I create reasons to convince myself.

Moreover, with time, memories fade.

It will be alright.

Sendai-san's memory should also fade, and eventually, she will forget about yesterday.

"Here, do it yourself."

I gave a gentle tug on Sendai-san's clothes beside me and let go.

I just need to make sure nothing unnecessary is said today.

Checking if there are any marks left just requires a slight lift of her shirt, nothing like what happened yesterday.

"Is this enough?"

Sendai-san lifted the hem of her shirt without hesitation. But it was only a little, revealing just two of the marks I had left.

"More."

She must have heard my voice, yet instead of lifting more, she lowered the hem of her shirt.

"You confirmed it, right? So, we're done here."
"I couldn't see it clearly. Just lift it properly."
"No."
"Why not? Just do what I say."
"It's not a penalty game, so I don't have to. I've shown you the marks, so be satisfied."

She declared this in a decidedly firm tone, holding her shirt down before I could reach for it. I couldn't believe she was the same person who had stripped off her clothes and underwear in front of me before.

"You said earlier, 'do as you please.'"

I knew it wasn't a penalty game and lacked any obligation, but since Sendai-san herself said it was okay to do as I pleased, she should quietly accept what I intend to do.

"Do you want to see the kiss marks that badly?"
"They're not kiss marks, just marks."
"Whatever they are, I'm not showing you anymore."

Even as she said this firmly, I couldn't accept it at this point. She needed to take responsibility for her words and allow me to confirm more than just two marks. If I wished to touch her body, she should allow that too.

Crafting a reason to touch the red marks, I placed my hand on Sendai-san's shoulder and gently pushed her down with my weight.

"Ouch."

Her back hit the floor hard, and a voice of discontent arose.

"If you're going to push me down, say so beforehand. It's dangerous."

Ignoring her words, I lifted her knit sweater just enough to touch the red marks.

Beside her navel.
Above and below her ribs.
Near her side.

I traced each of the numerous marks I had left yesterday, so many

that counting them seemed pointless. As my fingers brushed against her bra, I hesitated on whether or not to remove it. As I traced the lace edge covering her chest, Sendai-san tried to grab my hand.

"Don't move."
"Miyagi, you think if you just speak firmly, I'll do everything you say, don't you?"
"I won't lift any more, and I won't take off your bra, so just listen."

As I gently touch her chest over her bra, Sendai-san replied, sounding annoyed.

"You think I will?"
"Please."

I insistently spoke, pressing firmly on the red marks.
In ensuring the marks I'd left were still there, I felt the need to affirm that part of Sendai-san, a part only I knew about. I couldn't bear for anyone, including Sendai-san herself, to get in the way.

"...I'm only letting you touch the visible parts, alright?"

Sounding resigned, Sendai-san relaxed.
Upon her body, I traced the marks once more, slowly.
With my fingertips, I caressed her smooth skin, pressing the marks with my nails. I laid my palm over the red marks and absorbed Sendai-san's warmth.

The red marks speckling her white skin extended beneath her clothing.
Remembering where my lips had been yesterday, I caressed over her clothes, tracing the unseen marks, and again ran my fingers along the visibly marked side.

The red marks, both visible and not, assured me a part of me was still with Sendai-san. Markings on her skin, bright under the light, seemed unlikely to fade anytime soon. But before they could, I wanted to leave more of myself, so I leaned in toward a red mark.

Biting gently above her navel, I sucked firmly.

Ideally, I wanted to mark places visible to everyone.
I wanted to leave marks on places like her back, untouched yesterday,

If possible, I'd cover Sendai-san with my marks completely.

I wanted it so that anyone glancing at her body would know she belonged to someone, and that if she glanced at someone else, she'd instantly remember who she belonged to.

Wishing to bind someone like this might mean there's something wrong with me. I understood my abnormality but couldn't help making a new mark on her body.
Above her stomach, shifting slightly, I pressed my lips. After marking the fourth spot, Sendai-san quietly spoke.

"Miyagi, you said you'd just look, right?"
"I was just re-marking where they were fading."

Raising my face to answer, she responded with a slightly lower voice.

"When I checked this morning, none of them looked like they were fading, and you made new ones, right?"
"They seemed about to fade now, so I refreshed them, and added a few for good measure."
"Hey, weren't we supposed to add more only when I broke the promise of telling you if I'd be late? I haven’t broken any promises today."

With that, I sucked hard beneath her ribs, leaving yet another mark.

"Adding one or two more shouldn't be a big deal, should it?"

I asserted, trailing my hands strongly along her ribs.

"It's not just one or two, though. You added more than that."

"...What's up with you today, Sendai-san?"

I inquired, observing her uncharacteristic displeasure.

"'What's up with me?"
"I mean, whatever I do, you don’t usually complain this much, right?"

Gently, I caressed the red marks on her side and looked at Sendai-san as she grasped my hand. As it was peeled away from her

stomach, I continued.

"You were being honest until just now, Sendai-san. What changed all of a sudden?"

Hearing my voice, Sendai-san sighed and straightened her clothes. Then she sat up and hugged me as I straddled her legs.

"Miyagi. Did you have any dreams yesterday?"

Sendai-san suddenly whispered.

"Why are you asking suddenly?"
"Just tell me if you dreamt something unusual."

I understood what kind of dream she was referring to.
It was the dream I had seen, the one I had impulsively mentioned to Sendai-san yesterday. She must remember it and was now asking me.

"Unusual in what way?"

Hesitant to solidify her memories, I asked. She responded with unrelated words instead of answering my question.

"I had one, you know. So this kind of thing troubles me."

I couldn't see her face, but I felt her warmth transmitted from her body pressed against mine.

"I don't mean it that way."
"I know, but it makes me feel that way."

Sendai-san's hand slipped deftly under my shirt.
Her fingers traced my waist and along my spine.
Every movement passed more than just tickling warmth from her touch over my skin.

"Miyagi, you should feel the same way."

"I don't. That's not being just a roommate anymore."

When I pushed against Sendai-san's shoulder, she pulled away, and I could finally see her face.

"Then, is what you were doing earlier something roommates do?"

She said softly, looking at me with an oddly serious expression.

"...It is."

"Then that means I can do the same, right?"

Her hand began to move, gently caressing my side and pressing her palm against me. Distracted by the warmth from her hand, I was caught off guard when she bit my shoulder over my shirt, and I pushed her away forcefully.

"No, Sendai-san."

"Why not? It's strange that only I have marks."

"It's not strange."

"Can't I at least leave one mark?"

"No."

"Then let me touch you."

I wasn't sure what she meant by "then," but as she tried to lift my shirt, I grabbed her hand and declared firmly.

"Your touch feels too erotic, Sendai-san, and I don't want that."

"How come you get it, but don't feel the same way?"

It's not that I don't feel anything at all.

Sendai-san's touch feels good, and my rational mind, which is supposed to reject her, starts to abandon its duty. Her warmth seeps through the gaps in my reason, threatening to tear it to pieces.

In the past, I succumbed to those feelings on Sendai-san's bed, finding pleasure and embarrassment in actions I can never forget.

Even now, remembering that day, my throat feels dry despite having just drunk some orange juice.

If I keep repeating such things, I won't be myself anymore. I barely understand what I want now, and I'll become even more confused.

"Miyagi, just throw away your rationality."

The voice seemed as if it peered into my thoughts, and I let out a small sigh.
My body felt hot.

I don't understand how I want things to be with Sendai-san.
I don't know the path I want to take.
I was the one who said I wanted to stay roommates, yet now, I'm unsure if those were the right words.
Even though I understand nothing, I desperately want Sendai-san to remain here.

"Sendai-san..."

When I called her softly, she responded with, "What?"
I released her hand I had been holding and let my fingers glide over her earring.

"If you promise never to leave, you can do as you wish, Sendai-san."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'll stay right here."

Sendai-san embraced me, saying words that felt false.

"Will you stay here without going to part-time work or university?"

Of course, that's impossible.

Sendai-san will attend university and go to work.
I might not work, but I'll still go to university.

It's impossible for either of us to remain here without going anywhere.

Proving my point, Sendai-san offered no response.

I gently pushed her body away and bit her lip. I pressed down hard enough to leave a mark, tasting a bit of blood.

"Miyagi, that hurts."

Her voice came out flat.
It hurt me too.
Even though there was no visible wound, it felt painful.

Chapter 70

After Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 208

I take off my clothes and examine my body in the bathroom mirror. I thought the same thing yesterday and this morning, but really, it's terrible.

Countless marks left by Miyagi cover my reflection in the mirror. They're only in places hidden by clothes, so there's virtually no chance anyone else would see them. But when I think about the possibility of going to the hospital due to an accident or illness, I can't help but sigh.

I really should have stopped Miyagi earlier.

When she said she wanted to check the marks.
When she told me to lift my shirt properly.
When she pushed me down.

There were plenty of opportunities to stop her. But I couldn't do it and ended up allowing new marks to be added to my body.

I trace a mark below my collarbone, one left yesterday.

Miyagi knows I'll listen no matter what she says.
That's why she can leave marks like this.

One, two, three. My fingertips trace over some of Miyagi's marks in the mirror. Just touching a few of them makes me feel Miyagi's presence, making the depths of my body warm. Today's increase in numbers only strengthens the feeling of wanting her.

'All of you belongs to me.'

Miyagi said something strange yesterday, causing my body to react oddly to the marks.

I should've just said earlier that I wouldn't go to my part-time job or university.

Such thoughts pop into my head, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

In the end, I couldn't touch Miyagi any more than that.
It was the right thing to do, and I think that's what Miyagi wanted too.
I didn't do anything wrong.
And yet, I regret it.

I slowly open my eyes, touching the spot where Miyagi bit my lip. There's no blood on my fingers, but it still hurts.

Miyagi is a fool.
Even if she leaves kiss marks where they can't be seen, it's pointless if she leaves a noticeable wound on my lip.

Even so, I think it's good that the wound is visible.

It's painful and bleeds; it's easy to recognize as an injury that needs healing. But the marks on my body are different. The red, akin to blood in the mirror, resembles a wound but isn't an injury, nor does it seem like one. Just by knowing Miyagi left them, what was merely a bruise becomes something special to me, melding with my body and letting her soak into me.

Even if they fade, they will surely remain within me, making me long for the next mark.

Miyagi's marks are like that, and I don't want to heal them like other wounds. On the contrary, I want her to leave more, in visible places as well. While I worry about continuously getting marked like today, an even stronger part of me craves new marks.

Because of Miyagi's marks, the part of me that tries to follow reason and the part trying to escape it are splitting, making my chest ache. The part I must keep locked away wants to abandon university and my part-time job, choosing instead to stay by Miyagi's side.

"This is messed up."

I mutter softly and enter the bathroom.

I turn on the shower, letting lukewarm water run over the marks as if to wash them away, rubbing them strongly despite knowing they won't disappear.

I don't dislike receiving such marks, nor do I mind Miyagi seeing my body. But if this continues, I won't be able to stop myself from splitting apart in the near future.

I wish I had the power to turn the impossible possible.

I want to fulfill Miyagi's wishes as much as I can, but fulfilling the wish I heard today is impossible. She probably knows that, too, but wishing, "Stay here instead of going to your job or university," is unrealistic.

For two or three days, I can give all my time to Miyagi, but I can't continue to do so indefinitely. If I keep skipping university, my family's support will likely be cut off, and if that happens, I'll have to work to maintain my current lifestyle. Once I start working to just make a living, I'll have even less time at home.

If listening to Miyagi would make her happy, I'd want to do that. My own desires are irrelevant.

That's what I think, but I lack the power to make the impossible possible.

Even though I can give her as many feelings as she wants.

I'm filled with feelings for Miyagi that she might say she doesn't need. I don't know when they grew to be so vast, but these burgeoning feelings want to escape from within me, despite my desire to maintain the status quo. Yet, I can't express my love.

I turn up the strength of the shower.
The lukewarm water, almost matching my body temperature, wets the many marks and drains away. I can't help but wish this lukewarm warmth were Miyagi's heat instead, and I stop the shower.

Please, let's remain as roommates.

Though I knew I shouldn't voice these feelings, Miyagi's words have become a curse, clamping my mouth shut even tighter.

Moreover, my feelings for Miyagi, which have grown too deep, are becoming something I can't express even if the chain of being roommates disappears.

That's because I fear that if I say I love her, I might not only break our relationship as roommates but also break Miyagi herself.

Lately, Miyagi talks a lot, saying things that make it seem like she loves me. She surprises me with how openly she expresses her feelings, making me feel as if I'm allowed to feel affection, so I draw closer to her. But then she quickly distances herself, leaving only fragments of Miyagi in my hands.

Even if I think I've gotten closer, it's only for a moment, and the next time I look, it feels like Miyagi is in a different place. Even eating together, being in the same room, or feeling her warmth next to me, we don't seem to be in the same space.

Fragments of Miyagi are scattered here and there, and I keep collecting them.

If I continue approaching Miyagi like this and ever manage to convey my feelings, I'm scared she'll crumble to pieces and disappear from my sight. Yet, more than that, I want to get closer to Miyagi, to tell her I love her.

I turn the shower on again.
I wash my hair and body, then leave the bathroom.

I change into sweatpants that serve as pajamas, dry my hair, and drink orange juice in the shared space. The glass empties quickly, and I glance at Miyagi's room door.

Tonight, it's probably better to return to my room without saying anything.
Thinking that, my hand is already knocking on her door.

"What is it?"

After knocking three times, the door opens slightly, and Miyagi peeks out.

"The bathroom is free now."

I say, and with a “Yeah,” the door starts to close. I call out, “Miyagi.”

“Is there something else?”
“Want to take a bath together sometime?”

I say, not seriously, but hoping a little that it could happen.

“No way. I’m not doing that.”
“I figured you’d say that.”

As soon as she replies, Miyagi tries to close the door again, and I catch her hand.

I should just go back to my room quietly.

I think so, but I can’t let go of Miyagi’s hand. I used to be good at matching with others, but I can’t seem to do it with Miyagi. Something I could always do, I can’t do anymore only in front of her.

“Sendai-san.”

Miyagi's small voice reverberates delicately in my eardrums.

"What is it?"
"...Is doing things like what we just did something you only let me do?"

Whether it's leaving red marks, giving kiss marks, or making me hers with indelible marks, it's clear that "things like what we just did" refer to those actions.

"Of course, I wouldn't let anyone but you do something like that."
"Then that's good."

I can't quite grasp the meaning of that "good" I heard. Is it "good" as in relief? "Good" as in resignation? Or is it something else entirely? Without finding an answer, the door closes with a soft thud.

After Miyagi (II)

Part 209

"Here, wear this today."

With two knocks on the door, I showed a skirt to Miyagi, who peeked out.

"...I didn't hear anything about playing dress-up."

With a reply that was just as I expected, I smiled warmly. There was never going to be a time when Miyagi would willingly accept wearing a skirt to the school festival. I knew this, but I had a feeling that if I asked her just before we went out, she might wear it for me. So, on the morning of the school festival, I told Miyagi.

"I didn't say anything, but I bought this skirt for you."

"I never asked you to buy it, and I don't want it."

Of course, she never asked, nor would she ever ask me. I knew she'd say she didn't want it, and I was fine with whatever clothes she wore.

However, I have a certain sentiment towards this skirt.

I love Miyagi's legs peeking from beneath skirts, and whenever I see her in one, it reminds me of our high school days. She doesn't have to wear one all the time, but it would make me happy if she wore one occasionally for me.

"It's not expensive, so please take it."

There was no lie in my words. The skirt I was offering was from the cheaper side if we were to classify it by prices. I didn't want her to return it just because of its cost, so I chose a brand from fast fashion.

"You can just wear it yourself, Sendai-san."

"I bought it in your size with both our money, so I'd be in trouble if

you don't wear it."

The skirt was bought with the savings from our high school days. Although it's said to be money for both of us, since it was savings from the five thousand yen Miyagi gave me, it wasn't weird for it to buy something only for Miyagi.

"That was your money, Sendai-san."

Hearing Miyagi speak the expected words, I responded with those I had prepared.

"We decided it was for the two of us, didn't we?"

"Then why are you deciding what to buy on your own, Sendai-san?"

"If you cooperate, it would count as something we did together."

"Cooperate?"

"A purchaser and a wearer. That's cooperation, right?"

It's a flimsy reason for making her wear a skirt bought with both our money, but I have a feeling that, for the current Miyagi, I can push this through. If she genuinely found it annoying, the door would already have been shut.

"That's not cooperation."

Miyagi complained in a disgruntled voice while looking at the skirt.

"If you're not going to wear it, then I won't let you leave this house. But it's fine if you're okay with making Utsunomiya wait."

I didn't actually expect words like these to work as threats, nor could I afford to keep Utsunomiya waiting, but Miyagi muttered something that wasn't quite a complaint.

"...What about the top?"

"The top?"

"What should I wear?"

With furrowed brows, she lightly kicked my leg. The skirt I was wearing swayed a little, and Miyagi kicked my leg again, this time gently.

"I think your hoodie would be fine. I can lend you one of my outfits too, if you'd like?"

"I'll wear my own."

"Then, come to my room once you've changed. I'll do some light makeup for you."

I handed the skirt to a less-than-pleased-looking Miyagi, lowering her voice a bit as she spoke.

"No need for that."

"If you really hate it, I won't force you. Just let me know when you're ready."

"Alright."

With her usual displeased expression, Miyagi shut the door with a bang, leaving me alone in the shared space.

A Saturday with many markings and a Sundays with even more markings.

After everything, the marks have faded over time, blending back into me, and our life has returned to normal.

—At least, on the surface.

I let out a small breath and returned to my room. Sitting on the bed, I looked down at the leg Miyagi had kicked.

Miyagi added a new rule to our usual routines. It wasn't something we discussed and agreed upon, and I haven't acknowledged it either.

I rubbed above the collarbone through my clothes. There, a new mark made by Miyagi remains.

A new rule. Or perhaps it could be called a ritual.

While the many marks faded away, there were newer ones created on my body.

The rule Miyagi made up on her own applies on days when I have a shift at the café and doesn’t on days I tutor. Thus, marking happens on café workdays.

I'm not sure why some jobs earn me a mark while others don't, but it's likely that Miyagi dislikes the café job, which was added later.

I glance at the door. Even though it's just putting on a skirt, Miyagi isn't here yet.

I press hard underneath my collarbone.

Without my conscious agreement, marks appeared in time with my part-time job, fading away as promises dictated. And probably, they won't appear anymore.

The reason is simple—the new rule applied only until the school festival, and since my café job ended, there's no days left for the new rule.

And that leaves me feeling a bit disappointed.

The marks on my body make me feel strongly connected to the words Miyagi uttered: "All of you belongs to me."

Miyagi's lips, marking me, stirs feelings I can't voice, but when she whispers that I belong to her, it feels good. It makes me want more marks. But the limited number of marks keeps me sane, ending before my reason snaps, which I find just right.

Five minutes, ten minutes pass, and there's a knock at the door. I remain seated on the bed and say, "Come in." Miyagi enters the room, wearing the skirt I handed her.

"I'm done changing."

Standing by the door, Miyagi speaks in a bored manner, prompting me to get up and walk over to her.

"It looks good on you."

"You don't have to say that."

"I think it's cute."

"Sendai-san, shut up. You're annoying."

Despite her grumbling, I reached out, tucking her hair behind her ear. After brushing her earring, I leaned in close to her ear, catching a hint of shampoo fragrance.

"You smell nice."

"It's your shampoo, after all."

"Well, it's Miyagi's shampoo now too, right?"

"...Yeah, I guess."

Rather than buying a new one when she ran out, Miyagi started using my shampoo, leaving just one bottle in the bathroom now. It’s because she kept the promise made the day I picked up her lip balm from the shared space, making Miyagi carry my scent recently.

I cherish such small things, so I stroke her hair. As I brought a strand to my lips, Miyagi pushed against my body before my lips could touch her hair. The closeness drifted apart slightly, and she undid two buttons on my blouse. Her hands traces over my collarbones, and my heart pounded.

I could stop Miyagi if I wanted.

But I don't want to.

Her fingers brushed the mark under my collarbone, and she leaned closer. However, rather than placing her lips there, she pressed her teeth against my neck. After a slight pain, something soft adhered. It's not a place covered by clothes, yet her lips cling quite intensely.

"Hey, now."

As I try to push Miyagi's shoulder away, she doesn't budge. The warmth from Miyagi's body merged with mine at the nape of my neck, creating a singular heat that prickled my heart like a needle.

I thought the ritual had ended with my part-time job, but it seems that wasn't the case.

This ritual, which began as a penalty game, is difficult to resist. Even knowing there's a visible mark, I still feel the urge to embrace Miyagi.

I slide my hand from her shoulder to her back. Just as I'm about to hold her tightly, clutching her hoodie, her lips finally part from my neck.

"Is there a mark, Miyagi?"

Even though I already know the state of my neck, I ask.

"There is, here."

While lightly tracing the spot with her fingertips, Miyagi responds in a voice devoid of apology.

"That's visible, you know. Did you mark it there because you didn't want me to go to the school festival?"

I share the blame for not stopping her, but having a visible kiss mark when we're about to meet Utsunomiya is problematic. While it’s unlikely she'd think Miyagi was responsible, it could still lead to complications.

I might have to change my clothes.

It's a hassle since I've already done my makeup, but it's better than having a visible mark.

"Swear on the earrings, Sendai-san."

As I feel like sighing, Miyagi speaks softly.

"That I won’t go to the school festival?"

Though a mark like this wouldn't bar me from attending, it does seem like a reason Miyagi might make a mark.

"No, swear that Maika won't notice the mark."

"Even if she does, I won't say it was you, so you can relax."

"That's not what I'm worried about. I just don't want anyone to see the mark."

"Then you should have put it somewhere less visible."

"You're mine, so it shouldn't matter where I mark you."

Miyagi's voice, steeped in displeasure, rings in my ear. Her voice could be considered angry, yet it carries a sweetness akin to caramel, leaving me speechless. All I can do is follow her command and, touching the plumeria earring with my fingertips, I utter the words of my promise.

"I'll make sure Utsunomiya doesn't see it."

Making me hide a mark that she placed in a visible area—it feels utterly unreasonable.

Miyagi can be truly awful.

Yet, despite feeling this way, I press a kiss to her earring.

After Miyagi (III)

Part 210

I left the house in a hurry, walking down the path where I occasionally meet Mike-chan, heading toward the station. I was walking at Miyagi's pace, which was quite fast.

"Hurry up, Sendai-san," she urged.

"We don't have to rush."

I had changed my clothes and touched up my makeup to hide the marks Miyagi left on me. While doing that, I lightly put some makeup on Miyagi too. Because of all that, we left the house later than planned.

"It might not be okay, you know."

Though the delay was mostly Miyagi's fault, she took the lead, visibly displeased. Even though there was no need to rush to make our appointment, Miyagi distanced herself while walking.

I probably did something that upset her.

Was it the makeup, calling her cute, or maybe our last kiss? No, it was likely all of the above.

Miyagi marched ahead without looking back. I gently touched the red mark on my neck through my sweater.

Autumn was nearing its end, and the wind was starting to get chilly. But today was warm and sunny, so I wanted to wear something other than a turtleneck. If it weren't for the mark Miyagi left, I wouldn't need to hide my neck. Yet, even though I should find the new mark undesirable, I'm secretly pleased by its presence, a mark that should have been something of the past.

I pressed down on the mark through my sweater, then let go. My gaze shifted between Miyagi's swaying skirt and her feet moving consistently at the same pace—right, left, right—never slowing.

Looking up, I noticed the thin clouds trailing across the blue sky, reminding me of the penguins I once saw flying at the aquarium with Miyagi.

Come to think of it, we still hadn't visited the zoo we talked about going to in the fall.

The sky stretched further and higher than in summer. If we didn't hurry, winter would be upon us. Miyagi, who often shivers from the cold, might not want to go to the zoo once winter arrives. I quickened my pace and caught up to her.

"Miyagi, remember our promise to go to the zoo?"

I asked, prompting her to abruptly stop and turn to face me.

"...You're a liar, Sendai-san," she said.

"Eh?"

"Winter's almost here," she accused.

"But it's still a little while off. Besides, I'm glad you remembered our promise to go in the fall."

Since I never heard Miyagi mention the zoo, I began to worry she had forgotten.

I was so happy I wanted to hop with joy right there and skip all the way to the station. But Miyagi still seemed irritable.

"You forgot, didn't you?" she spoke in a low tone.

"Forgot? Of course not."

I remembered, but my birthday came up before I could suggest going, then Miyagi's birthday followed. On top of that, a new part-time job began, and my free time filled up quickly. As tasks for university piled on, scheduling a visit to the zoo became increasingly unlikely, and autumn seemed to slip by faster than I realized.

"Well, you were busy with work," Miyagi remarked, advancing a

step or two ahead, prompting me to hurry after her.

"I know that was bad on my part. I'm sorry."

"It's not something you need to apologize for," she replied curtly.

"Is that promise still valid?"

"Do you want to go, Sendai-san?"

"I do. What about you, Miyagi?"

"Spring," came her brief response, but it was preferable to her rejecting the idea outright. In the past, she would have surely refused.

"Alright, let's make it spring then."

We can aim for spring break. If possible, I'd love to visit the aquarium again too.

Without encountering Mike-chan, we reached the station and passed through the ticket gate. As we followed the crowd to the platform, Miyagi softly called my name, "Sendai-san."

"What is it?"

"Is spring really okay for the zoo?"

"If you'd prefer winter, we can do that. Fewer people, more time to relax, right?"

"I don't want to relax in the cold."

"So, if we're not relaxing, winter's fine?"

"...A warm day would be better," she whispered.

Before she could change her mind, I replied swiftly, "Then, on a warm winter's day."

She didn't respond. She neither agreed nor disagreed, but knowing Miyagi, she would voice discontent if she were truly against it. Her silence meant she accepted the "warm winter's day" plan.

We could visit over winter break, before, or even after. I'd bundle Miyagi, who dreads the cold, in scarves and warm layers, and we'd go to the zoo.

If we weren't at a station, I'd swear by her earring.

I wanted to kiss her ear and make a vow, hoping she'd kiss mine in return, promising we would keep this promise for each other.

"Promise."

Instead of a kiss, I gently nudged the back of my hand against hers. Miyagi said nothing, but her lack of refusal was confirmation enough.

Just as we reached the platform, the train arrived, and we boarded. Though our conversation wasn't lively, we chatted about the school festival.

The train stopped occasionally, our words sometimes coming to a halt along with it, time passing in a relaxed manner as our destination loomed closer. Outside the window, the scenery Miyagi often saw slid past, a scene I'd glimpsed before when she fled from home. But back then, I was so overwhelmed I hardly noticed my surroundings.

I really don't want to feel like that again. I prefer Miyagi by my side.

As we alighted and walked along the platform, nothing unusual appeared in the view from the train nor at the station itself. All were mundane sights, ones I encountered on the way to university, yet I found myself wishing to see Miyagi's scenery every day.

Attending the same university, sharing the same classes. Spending far more time together than we do now. How wonderful those four years could be.

Holding my neck, a future I couldn't grasp crossed my mind. Though unseen, Miyagi remained with me.

Roots planted, deepening within me, are the red, burning marks of her affection.

There are enduring imprints from Miyagi on my body, but they're not enough. I want more than just residual marks—I crave her warmth. Searing, soothing warmth, the kind that melts to the core from Miyagi.

As we moved from the station, I reached for the hand I'd playfully nudged earlier and felt her fingers slip from mine with ease.

"What are you doing, Sendai-san?" she asked, her tone dipping slightly.

"I want to hold hands."

"We're almost at the meeting spot."

"I know."

We were meeting Utsunomiya at the nearby bookstore.

"No way I'm holding your hand."

I agreed that maybe we shouldn't hold hands, but even then, I wanted to grasp hers, even if only for the brief walk to our destination.

"There are plenty of people holding hands," I protested.

"Even so, I don’t want to."

It wasn’t uncommon for people to hold hands in public. Even if Utsunomiya saw us, she wouldn’t suspect anything particular about our relationship. Even if she found it odd, it would still be unlikely for her to figure out the nature of my and Miyagi’s relationship. Besides, officially, we're nothing more than roommates.

We weren’t friends, lovers, or anything else –merely roommates. Miyagi would allow nothing more.

"Miyagi."

I passed through the ticket gate and reached for her hand once more. But soon after, she slipped out of my grasp.

"Sendai-san, let go," she said, firmly pushing my arm with enough

force that I stumbled. I was about to protest when a cheerful voice rang out.

"Got a picture of the moment!"

I turned toward the voice and saw Utsunomiya holding up her phone.

"M-Maika? Our meeting place is the bookstore.”

Miyagi’s surprised voice was a far cry from the irritation she'd shown earlier. But it made sense for her to be caught off-guard, given Utsunomiya had appeared in a place other than our meeting spot.

"I figured it was about the time you two would show up here, so I came along. Then I saw you two act all lively together and got curious."

"We weren’t doing anything. Did you take a picture of that 'decisive moment'?"

Utsunomiya flashed a playful grin at Miyagi's question.

"Sure did. I've got a photo that's just begging for the title 'Miyagi Shiori's Secret Side'. So, what were you two arguing about?"

"We weren’t arguing. Sendai-san was just being difficult," Miyagi muttered with a hint of dissatisfaction as she tapped my arm. An electronic shutter sound followed.

"And now it's two," Utsunomiya added. "Should I send the one of Miyagi Shiori smacking Sendai Hazuki over to Ami?"

She held her phone screen toward us to show the captured photos.

It was me and Miyagi. And a slice of the scenery Miyagi always saw.

The images were a first for us, as we had never taken pictures together before.

"That would definitely be a hassle. I’ll hold grudges if you send it," Miyagi warned, while I chastised myself for the past.

Why hadn’t I taken photos of Miyagi before?
How could I have overlooked such an easy way to capture part of Miyagi?

Anyone could have taken a photo of Miyagi with something as simple as the smartphone Utsunomiya held. I regret not doing it. I wished I could go back and snap photos of Miyagi laughing at the aquarium, or her birthday, or a hundred other memories.

"Hmm, what should I do?" Utsunomiya chuckled playfully. I exhaled softly.

As if it were nothing, as casually as asking about tomorrow's plans, I paired my words with a smile to obtain what I desired.

"Hey, Utsunomiya. Could you send me those photos later?"

"Sure, I'll send them now. I'll send them to Shiori too," she replied, promptly sending them.

Looking at my phone, two pictures captured slices of our moment—the disgruntled yet familiar Miyagi pushing me away and another with her unusually lively as she tapped my arm.

"Thanks."

I smiled, and though reluctantly, Miyagi echoed my gratitude.

"By the way, do you two have any pictures together? I'd love to see them."

I glanced at Miyagi, whose silence prompted me to answer instead.

"We’ve never taken a picture together."

"What? Why not?"

"Well, there wasn’t any particular reason."

During our high school days, taking pictures together wasn't something we did. As university students, it never occurred to us to take photos because spending time together meant everything.

"Let’s stop the picture talk and go."

Miyagi urged, grabbing Utsunomiya’s hand and pulling her along, even though she hadn’t held mine.

"Shiori, you don't have to rush," Utsunomiya remarked, being dragged along, and I couldn’t help but feel it was unfair.

"Sendai-san, hurry up."

Called by Miyagi, I let out a breath. Though I missed the chance to hold her hand, I gained a treasure. I tucked my phone, now containing a piece of our time, into my bag and hurried to catch up with the two.

Chapter 71

After Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 211

A gentle bump on the back of my hand.
My fingers and hand that were grasped.

It was just a fleeting moment, yet I felt Sendai-san's warmth. But my hand didn't connect with hers—it was connected to Maika's instead.

"Miyagi, you're walking too fast."

Sendai-san, whose hand wasn't intertwined with mine, pulled on my arm.

"Shiori, even if you rush, the school festival isn't going anywhere."

I released the hand I was holding and apologized with a "Sorry" to Maika's voice. I was the one who rejected Sendai-san's hand, and that wasn't a mistake. Had we stayed connected, the decisive moment captured by Maika would have turned out differently.

So, it was better this way.

At least, that's what I tried to tell myself. Yet, a tiny, almost imperceptible regret lingered in me; maybe I shouldn't have brushed away Sendai-san's hand.

But if Maika had seen it, I probably would've regretted that too.

No, perhaps she did see it. She might have captured the moment Sendai-san grabbed my hand, leaving it as a photo on Maika's smartphone.

Imagining such things, I inwardly sighed. If Maika had actually photographed such a moment, she would likely say something.

So, it should be fine.

Assuring myself, I looked straight ahead. The school festival was something I looked forward to, yet the presence of Sendai-san made it hard to stay calm. Whenever Maika and Sendai-san teamed up, nothing good seemed to happen, and having the two of them by my side made my nerves buzz all the way to the tips of my hair. The hair sharing the same scent as Sendai-san's felt like it was sizzling, burning—

It's vexing. Truly infuriating.

My memories, regardless of my own will, inevitably revolve around Sendai-san. Whenever I try to think, she surfaces, as if on cue, intruding into my thoughts without my permission, which is utterly irritating.

"Hey, Shiori?"

Maika's voice pulled my consciousness back from where Sendai-san had taken it, back to the external world.

"Huh? What?"

"You weren't listening, were you?"

Apparently, Maika had been talking about something while my mind was preoccupied.

"Sorry, I wasn't listening. What were you saying?"

"I was saying how unusual it is to see you in a skirt and with makeup, Shiori. You usually don't wear skirts or makeup. Is it because of the school festival today?"

Of course, that's where the conversation would go. Anticipating this exact development, my temples throbbed, and I tousled my bangs in frustration. I didn't want to wear a skirt or put on makeup precisely because I knew Maika would comment.

"...It's not exactly like that."

I wanted to say that it wasn't my decision to be like this, but explaining would require revealing the reason behind this state,

which made it hard to be clear.

"It was my choice of skirt and makeup for Miyagi," Sendai-san chimed in unexpectedly, smiling brightly. I wanted to kick her for saying something unnecessary.

"Oh, I see."
"Isn't it cute?"

For some reason, Sendai-san boasted, and Maika stopped to examine me from head to toe.

"Yeah, it is cute. As expected of Sendai-san. It suits Shiori."

"See, Miyagi."

For some unknown reason, Sendai-san looked pleased, and from the other side came a voice saying, "Really cute." Clearly, this was a situation where I had no choice but to express gratitude, albeit reluctantly.

"...Thanks."
"Shiori, you should come to university in Sendai-san's fashion again."

"Ew, no way."

I automatically replied, taking a step forward. The university loomed closer, prompting Sendai-san and Maika to match my pace.

"Why not? It's nice."

Maika's voice prompted a slight glare at Sendai-san beside me.

"Sendai-san always tries to make me wear skirts."
"But they look good on you and they're cute."

It didn't sound like a lie, yet I couldn't bring myself to agree with Maika's words.

"That's not true. No more Sendai-san outfits."

"Oh, then, Sendai-san, can you pick my clothes next time?"

Maika's voice rang out louder than necessary, resonating in my ears.

Pick my clothes.

Those were words I'd never say, and no one else should either. Only I should request things from Sendai-san; she shouldn't comply with anyone else's words but mine.

No, that's not for me to decide. I have no right to stop Maika's request or bind Sendai-san's actions.

I understood this, but I didn't want to accept it.

"If you want my help," said Sendai-san brightly, her words painfully squeezing my heart. This was nothing more than a mundane exchange between friends, and despite knowing that Sendai-san isn't the type to refuse such requests, my breath grew shallow, stifling.

"Really?"
"Absolutely."

Wanting to escape from their voices, I took large strides closer to the university. Step by step, cautious not to quicken my pace too much.

We entered the bustling campus filled with the vibrancy of the festival. Cheerful voices reached my ears, and I took care to respond with safe words, avoiding absent responses.

I looked at Sendai-san's ear, and then her neck.
There was something I had left on her.

Piercings that would remain on her forever and a red mark that would fade in a few days.

I wanted to touch either one right now. I wanted to feel that Sendai-san belonged to me. But with Maika here, I couldn't touch her earrings or her neck.

Perhaps noticing my gaze, Sendai-san touched her neck. Her fingers brushed over the mark above her turtleneck. Our eyes met, and I clenched my hand tightly into a fist.

"It's lunchtime. Shall we get something to eat? I'm starving. We have quite some time until the talk show, right?"

In front of the stalls lined up by the school building, Sendai-san stopped and looked at Maika.

"I'm hungry too, and we do have plenty of time, but are you really fine with it, Sendai-san? The talk show is about a voice actor, after all."

Both high school cultural festivals and university festivals are student-driven events, yet they're significantly different. University festivals boast grand-scale events seemingly planned by professionals, with TV-worthy figures gracing the university stage without surprise.

The talk show Maika and I were eagerly anticipating is one of those events, featuring the voice actors who worked on the anime adaptation of a manga we've been following.

"Yes, I watched the anime."
"You did?"

Maika sounded genuinely surprised.

"I borrowed the manga from Miyagi and read it, so I got curious and watched it."

"You kept zoning out and doing other things," I complained bitterly to the sociable, cheerful Sendai-san who wasn't mine. Even when we watched something together, Sendai-san wouldn't concentrate.

While I was watching the anime, Sendai-san would grab my hand, kiss me, or start talking, making it impossible to focus on the story, leading to re-watching the episode. Even during Golden Week, when we went to see a movie, she kept doing irrelevant things while sitting next to me.

"Shiori, you and Sendai-san watch anime together sometimes, huh?" Maika remarked. "Watching together is more fun than watching alone," I replied. "Even so, Sendai-san, you get bored so quickly when we watch movies together, don't you?" I nudged Sendai-san's arm instead of kicking her.

"It's not that I'm bored," she responded, touching her neck and smiling at me. Even though that gentle smile annoyed me, I couldn't

kick or bite her like usual, so I pushed her arm once more, eliciting laughter from Maika. "You two really get along well," Maika commented.

It's not like we're close or anything. I swallowed the words that wanted to escape and chose another response. "It's just that Sendai-san wanted to watch together, so I did," I said.

"Oh, really?" Maika giggled, and I lightly slapped her arm.

"I can't concentrate when watching with Sendai-san, so it's not enjoyable," I admitted. "Oh, really?" Maika said theatrically.

"I bet you're just having fun with this," I retorted, condensing all my objections into a single statement. Then there was the snap of a camera shutter, making my temple twitch.

"Got a nice photo," I heard Sendai-san's voice. Glancing at her, I saw her holding her phone.

"...Why are you taking pictures?" I inquired.

"For memories," she replied.

"Of what?"

"Commemorating our visit to the school festival," she said, turning her phone to show me my sullen face.

It didn't make me happy. Such attention wasn't needed.

"But—"

Before I could finish saying "delete it," Sendai-san interrupted.

"Oh, Utsunomiya. Let me take a picture of you and Miyagi," she offered.

"Sure, sure, take one!" Maika said eagerly, intertwining her arm with mine. Sendai-san's phone likely captured us linked together. At this point, I couldn't say I didn't want it taken.

"Alright, you two, smile," Sendai-san said with a cheerful tone, and I forced the corners of my mouth up into a smile. It was the typical

pose friends make in photos. Maika probably beamed broadly, while my awkward smile faced the camera.

"I'm taking it," Sendai-san announced, followed by the click of the shutter. Once, twice, thrice—it was too many times.

"Sendai-san, you're taking too many," I complained, stepping away from Maika and approaching Sendai-san, who was still snapping photos. But before I could reach for the phone, she voiced her satisfaction.

"They came out cute," she said, holding the phone up to show us.

"I look weird. Delete it," I said immediately. From beside me, Maika chirped, "You look like you're having fun; it's cute."

"I'm not having fun," I muttered.

"What, Shiori, you aren't having fun?" Maika asked.

"...I am," I conceded begrudgingly.

"Then I'll take a picture of you and Sendai-san. After that, you can take one of me and Sendai-san," Maika suggested.

I didn't want to be photographed with Sendai-san. And I didn't want to take photos of Maika with her, either.

But since I couldn't provide a reason, I couldn't refuse. An unreasonable 'no' only works with Sendai-san.

I had always thought smartphones were convenient, but today they felt like something I wanted to erase from existence. I was flooded with resentment toward whoever invented them.

"Miyagi, your face looks scary," Maika teased.

"It's not scary," I retorted reflexively as Sendai-san naturally linked her arm with mine.

"Wait, Sendai-san, let go," I protested.

I had just taken a photo with Maika while we were linked. The situation wasn't any different. Yet, knowing it was Sendai-san made

my heart race, pounding in my chest as if I'd been running endlessly.

"It's fine," Sendai-san said, snuggling closer than Maika had. I knew I should say something, but nothing came out.

"Utsunomiya, take the photo!"

Right, my expression.

Hearing Sendai-san's voice reminded me that Maika was watching, and I hastily arranged my face into a neutral expression that I wouldn't mind anyone seeing.

After Sendai-san (II)

Part 212

Click.
The electronic sound goes off once, and Maika glances at her smartphone, making an exaggeratedly difficult expression.

"Shiori, your expression's stiff. Smile a bit more, okay?"
"I'm trying to smile."
"Then smile twice as much as you are now. I'll take another shot."

It's impossible.
Even if my expression is a bit stiff, I've managed to make a face that's acceptable to show to anyone; I wish that would be enough.

The corners of my mouth, standing beside Sendai-san, refuse to obey my will. I can't smile properly, nor can I make an indifferent face. If I could create a smile that satisfied Maika, I would have done so already.

"Shiori—"

A voice, urging me, rings out, prompting my brain to send the command to smile. However, the corners of my mouth only manage to rise halfway, and Maika's smartphone doesn't sound with a click.

I feel an urge to banish the word "smile" from this world. If I can't banish it, I'd like to change its meaning, at least for today, to include awkward faces or stiff expressions.

Sigh.

I sigh internally and resume my battle with my mouth, when Sendai-san's cheerful voice calls, "Utsunomiya."

"I don't think it's possible for Miyagi to smile right now."

Sendai-san says something that sounds like she looked right into my heart, forcing me to look at her spontaneously.

"Eh, Shiori, is there something wrong with you?"
"Miyagi's stomach is growling up a storm. It's making a huge fuss about being hungry to death."

As she jokingly speaks, a hand reaches from the side and lightly pats my stomach.

"It's not growling."
"It is."
"It's not."

I retrieve the arm held by Sendai-san and push against her arm, which insists my stomach's growling when it's not. “That's dangerous,” she retorts, and I hear a small giggle. When I pull her arm again, she falsely claims, “Your stomach growled again.”

Sendai-san's unusually cheerful demeanor is irritating.

"Sendai-san—"

Without any particular follow-up prepared, I hear a click just as I was about to complain, and I turn to look at Maika.

"I got a nice photo. We can work on the smiling later."

Though Maika’s voice sounds satisfied, I know it must be a strange photo. The proof is in her smirk as she looks at the picture.

Even standing beside Sendai-san, I wish my lips would move as easily as Maika's.

It's not that I want to grin, but standing next to Sendai-san, being able to pull off at least a single smile would be helpful in situations like this. If Sendai-san and Maika were never to interact again, it would be fine, but since they’ve become friends, such circumstances are bound to happen again.

"Maika, let me see the picture."

Giving up on manipulating my lips to my will, I approach Maika. Sendai-san also follows, saying, "I want to see it too."

"It's a funny picture. Take a look."
"So it's not a nice picture, but a funny one," I mutter, as I look at the

smartphone screen reluctantly. It shows me pulling Sendai-san's arm with a displeased expression.

"It is a nice photo. Sendai-san is smiling, and—huh? Sendai-san?" Maika raises her face from the smartphone, looking puzzled.

"Did I do something?"
"Your ear. Did you always wear earrings? I don't recall you wearing them before."

Maika says while staring intently at Sendai-san's ear.

"I did from the start. I even wore them when you visited my part-time workplace the other day."
"Did you? Maybe I was too focused on the uniform to notice. When did you get them?"
"Over a month ago, maybe?"
"Aren't those the earrings that came with the piercing kit? Aren't you going to change them?"

Reacting to Maika's words, Sendai-san touches her ear, gently stroking the earrings I had given her. My gaze sticks to her fingers, unable to pry away.

Her fingertips pull on her earlobe, and Sendai-san opens her mouth.

"I've been thinking about changing them... but it's my first pair of earrings, so there's a sentimental attachment—or maybe it just feels wasteful to part with them."

Ever since I adorned her with them on my birthday, Sendai-san has continuously worn the earrings I gave her. They preserve the promise on her person, visibly adorning Sendai-san in a way I can always see.

She could change earrings like she changes outfits, but Sendai-san does not. Even after a month, she continues to wear the earrings I gave her on her birthday.

"It's surprising. I thought Sendai-san would change them long before a month was up."
"I surprised myself."

Sendai-san laughs toward Maika, then smiles at me.

The word "surprising" that they utter—it exists within me as well.

I haven't told her not to switch the earrings, and I think if she wants to change them, that's perfectly fine. After all, I'm wearing earrings gifted by Sendai-san. As long as she doesn't change them without my knowledge, or choose ones picked by someone unfamiliar to me, she can switch anytime.

"Well, if I find some cute earrings, maybe I'll change them. But more importantly, shall we eat? Miyagi looks starved and ready to pass out; we can continue with the photos while eating."
"Sounds great, let's do that."

Maika agrees with Sendai-san's suggestion, and I nod in response.

"So, what shall we eat? Utsunomiya, do you have anything in mind?"
"Okonomiyaki."
"And you, Miyagi?"
"Yakisoba. What about you, Sendai-san?"
"Hmm, how about we get okonomiyaki and yakisoba and share them?"
"That sounds fun!"

Maika responds enthusiastically, and we purchase okonomiyaki, yakisoba, and some juice from the stalls, sitting side by side on a bench. We evenly divide the okonomiyaki and yakisoba and enjoy our lunch.

"By the way, isn't Sendai-san's university also having their festival right now?"

Halfway through eating her okonomiyaki, Maika looks at Sendai-san.

"Until tomorrow. If you want to come, I'll show you around."
"I have plans tomorrow. Can Shiori and I go together next year?"

Without asking, I'm suddenly thrown into the conversation. Before I can deny wanting to go, Sendai-san grins and responds cheerfully.

"Of course. I'll guide you, so come to my university next year."
"Awesome."

"Miyagi, you look like it's someone else's problem, but you're coming with us next year."

I'm not going.
I'd like to reply, but I can't. If I said I wouldn't go, it would probably result in Maika going alone, and that leaves me with only one option.

"I know. I'll go with you."

I don't want Maika going alone to Sendai-san's university.
So even if I'm reluctant, I'll have to go with her.

"Then it's settled."

Sendai-san cheerfully decides and takes a bite of her yakisoba.
We continue chatting about trivial matters while eating okonomiyaki and yakisoba, and as we finish most of it, Maika suddenly remembers.

"Oh, the photos."
"Miyagi, you're the photographer now."

A pat on the shoulder spurs me into action, robotically extracting my smartphone from my bag and standing up. Taking a couple of steps away from the bench, I turn around to see Sendai-san sitting beside Maika.

I raise the smartphone.
Sendai-san leans into Maika. The screen displays two people apparently getting along well. Instead of the shutter sound, my heartbeat pounds loudly, and I let out a small exhale.

On the small screen capturing the scene of the school festival, Sendai-san is smiling — a face reminiscent of her high school days. The beautifully crafted smile belongs to Maika, not me. And of course, beside her, Maika is smiling too.

I feel that is my spot. I was always there, it was natural for me to be there, and there was no one else beside her. Though I don't know much about Sendai-san when she's outside, when we go out together, I'm the only one beside her.

Yet today, Maika is in the spot where I should be, and I'm the one

capturing it.

It's dull.
It's not entertaining.
But I have to take the photo.

"Shiori, take it," Maika's voice calls out, and my fingers tap the shutter button as if they belong to someone else.

Click.

The familiar sound from today rings out once more, and the two figures on the screen are now a photo saved to my smartphone.

"I took it," I say, approaching the two, showing them the smartphone.
Sendai-san and Maika are saying something happily, but I can’t hear them. My gaze is locked on the smartphone, compelled to keep looking at them even if I don't want to.

The smiles on the screen are more beautiful than my likely distorted attempt at a smile.

The smartphone, which should be light, feels heavy.
So heavy, I feel like throwing it away.
I sit on the bench and tuck the smartphone away in my bag.

I press the finger that tapped the button hard with my other hand.

It's a pain similar to forcibly peeling off a scab and quietly cutting myself. It's a dull, throbbing pain. Even though it's a small wound, it feels like blood is spreading unnoticed, leaving discomfort everywhere.

I want to mark Sendai-san right now, to create more red marks on her body.
If not that, then I at least want to touch her neck and show Maika the red mark.

"Shall we head to the talk show venue soon?"
Sendai-san's voice pulls my face up from its downward gaze.
Her neck, where there should be a red mark, catches my eye, and I hastily get up, pretending to be engrossed.

The red mark on Sendai-san's neck.

Maika shouldn't assume that I was the one who put it there, but I can't show it to her. That mark is something only Sendai-san and I know of, a secret just between the two of us.

"Shiori, the venue is in the second building, right?"
Maika's voice reaches me.
If I just slightly adjust what's covering the red mark, I could show it to Maika. I could tell her that this is my doing, and declare that Sendai-san belongs to me.

—No, that's not right.

If I keep obsessing over Sendai-san, I'll go mad.
Today is a day full of fun activities, so I should not focus on what's by my side but on other things instead.

"Yeah," I reply, making my voice as cheerful as possible, and start walking with them.

After Sendai-san (III)

Part 213

Joyful.
Joyful.
So very joyful.

With that thought in mind, I looked around. The university wrapped in the festive atmosphere of the school festival felt exhilarating just being there—provided I ignored the sound coming from beside me.

"Sendai-san, what are you doing?"

I called out to the source of the noise.

"Taking pictures."
"Stop messing around and watch where you're walking."

The click of a camera echoed down the hallway of the second school building, where the three of us walked side by side. I tapped Sendai-san on the shoulder. She knew that I couldn't be firm with her in front of Maika, and thus continued using her phone as a camera unabated.

It really gets on my nerves.

"I'll confiscate your phone if you take another picture."

I came to a halt and reached for Sendai-san's phone. But she deftly dodged my hand and the clicking sound echoed again in the hallway.

If this were my room, I'd throw a stuffed crocodile at her, but there's no crocodile tissue cover in the university. Unable to kick anything, all I could do was strongly call her name, "Sendai-san!"

"Shiori, it's just photos. Let it go."

Maika said with a laugh.

“Utsunomiya, over here.”

Sendai-san gleefully aimed her phone at Maika, who responded with a smile, and another click sounded promptly. I took a big step forward to walk ahead of the two.

I shouldn't let it bother me.
Maika’s smile caught on Sendai-san’s phone is no big deal.

"If you keep taking photos here, we won't make it to the talk show in time."

I called to them from two steps ahead and took another step forward. But then my hoodie was tugged, stopping me from progressing further.

"I think we'll be fine. Let’s take one last photo together."

Declared Sendai-san as she released my hoodie and linked arms with me. Naturally, Maika joined in, linking arms with me as well. In Sendai-san’s phone screen, all three of us appeared.

“Taking the shot.”

After her words, the electronic click sounded, and she put the phone away.

"Last year, I never would've dreamed I’d be taking photos with Sendai-san."

Maika said nostalgically, as she began walking towards the venue.

"I didn’t think I’d be taking photos with us three either."

Sendai-san’s cheerful voice reached my ears, and I idly touched my neck. Pictures shouldn’t be things to stress over. Convincing myself, we walked down the hallway side by side. We reached the venue, handed over our tickets to the staff, and sat in the back half of the lecture hall. Maika called out to a bespectacled girl walking down the aisle.

“Asakura-san!”
“Oh, Utsunomiya-san. And Miyagi-san too. Did you two come with a friend today… Friend?”

Asakura-san, whom we befriended after entering university, halted and looked at us, or rather at Sendai-san. I had told her I was attending the talk show with a friend today, but seeing Sendai-san beside me seemed to make her want to ask, “Friend?” She appeared quite taken aback.

“I’m Sendai. We three went to the same high school.”

Following the introduction, Sendai-san gave a polite smile to Asakura-san. I had seen her do this many times in high school, yet it never left me in a good mood.

“Ah, oh, right. Um, I’m Asakura.”
Asakura stammered while bowing slightly. The awkwardness was palpable, so Maika spoke to her gently.

“Asakura-san, isn’t your tone a bit stiff?”
“Well, you seem quite different from these two. It makes me nervous.”
“Should I leave?”

Sendai-san softly joked as she started to stand, but Asakura-san quickly pointed to the front of the lecture hall.

“No, uh, my friends are over there. Utsunomiya-san, Miyagi-san, see you later.”

With that, Asakura-san quickly made her way down the aisle, and Maika stood up.

“Ah, wait, Asakura-san! About that book you borrowed the other day—”

Whether she heard Maika or not, Asakura-san didn’t stop.

“Sorry, I’ll be right back.”

Maika dashed off, chasing after the flustered Asakura-san, leaving me and Sendai-san to chat alone, though not entirely by ourselves.

“...First time I heard about someone named Asakura.”

Sendai-san remarked softly, looking over at me.

“Didn’t mention her.”
“You should’ve.”
“No need to mention everything.”

I am under no obligation to reveal every detail of my friendships to Sendai-san. Since I don't have complete knowledge of all her friends, it’s not fair to be blamed for not mentioning Asakura-san’s existence.

“...True.”

Sendai-san turned her gaze forward. Her not looking at me in Maika’s absence caused a slight pang in my chest. I reached towards the knit around her neck and touched it. I mischievously tugged it, a casual gesture like friends joking around.

“Miyagi, if you pull more, it'll stretch.”

Sendai-san said, looking at me and speaking with the same tone she uses when talking to Maika.

Today's Sendai-san isn't the same as usual. Even though she wears the mark I put on her, signifying she’s mine, she doesn’t seem like my Sendai-san. Taking photos with Maika, not giving me attention.

Such trivial things I can’t tolerate.

Everything, everything, everything. Though they wouldn't matter with others, when it comes to Sendai-san, they seem significant.

“If you pull anymore, it’ll show. I won’t be able to keep our promise.”

“Keep the promise.”

Under her sweater lies the mark that shows she belongs to me. Despite that unchanging fact, regardless of who she’s with or what she’s talking about, I’m still anxious. The insecurity that faded in the past by touching her resurfaces effortlessly at any time.

“If you want me to keep it, cooperate.”

Sendai-san’s words were reasonable.
Yet my hand refused to let go.

“Don’t blame me if Utsunomiya returns.”

Upon hearing that name from Sendai-san’s lips, my spine creaks. My body reacts to something this small, making my emotions waver.

Why?
Why do I feel like this?

The instinct to reject Sendai-san forming bonds and relationships with others.

I’m not sure what this feeling is.
No. Truthfully, I should know what it is.

The thing I've felt all day today.

There's no way I wouldn’t know.
I’ve known long ago.
It’s—.
This is what they call possessiveness.

The desire to keep Sendai-san all to myself, it's nothing but possessiveness. I let go of Sendai-san and exhale lightly.

No, that’s not it.
We’re just roommates; we aren’t close enough to feel such things.
Although these feelings resemble that, they’re something different.

It’s not possessiveness.
Not that. Something different, different, different.
After all, if this is possessiveness, where does it stem from—

“Miyagi?”

Sendai-san’s voice comes, prompting me to look ahead.

Don't think about it.

Right now, it's the school festival, and I should be thinking about enjoying it.

"Sorry."
"Huh?"

"Sorry for pulling."

I inhaled deeply and exhaled.
The sudden words that appeared in my mind made me want to flee, but I couldn't run away. Maika would return soon. Besides, even if I fled, those words lurking in my mind wouldn't simply disappear.

"I'm back," Maika announced.

As if nothing had happened, Sendai-san started chatting away. Desperate to bury the words I didn't want to know about deep in my heart, I joined in on their conversation. Before long, the talk show began, and the familiar voices from the anime echoed through the lecture hall.

Listening to the much-anticipated talk show was enjoyable.
But that joy only swept over the surface, while the unextinguishable words kept bobbing up, snatching away my genuine enjoyment. My feelings tilted towards Sendai-san next to me, my antennae constantly reaching out.

A chasm lingered between my body and feelings, creating unease.

Though my body was enveloped by the bright capsule of excitement, my feelings were confined within a gray capsule, slowly sinking with the weight of lead.

Joy wasn't an eraser that could erase the words I had realized.
The amalgam of joy and dullness caused a dissonance within me.

With half-formed feelings, the talk show ended, and we stood up.
The school festival offered various events, from which we chose several. We visited the food stalls again, took pictures, chatted, and before we knew it, time had flown, and it was time to part ways with Maika and board the train home.

Usually, I ride the train alone, but today there were two of us.
With Sendai-san sitting beside me, I felt unsettled.
The half of my body closest to Sendai-san instinctively leaned toward her.

I didn't know what to make of myself like this.
In the swaying train, the day's memories were gently shaken, merging the fun and dull moments of the school festival into one

orb that rolled around inside me.

Last year's cultural festival was spent with Maika and Ami, the three of us.
This year, Sendai-san took Ami’s place. It wasn't that Ami and I had drifted apart; it was just that our living circumstances and roles had changed. This wasn’t an uncommon phenomenon; people repeatedly come close and drift apart.

Perhaps this will be the case with Sendai-san and me too.
This year, she was beside me.
But next year, she might not be.

Despite promising future birthdays together with her, these thoughts still creep in.

Fearing an uncertain future, I find myself thinking about just confining Sendai-san at home, realizing the words echoing inside me once again.
With an exhale, I wish I could expel these words along with my breath.

"Miyagi, we're getting off."

The call made it feel like I had been on the train for an eternity, and we disembarked. Chatting about the school festival, we walked home, arriving at our front door. Sendai-san unlocked it and opened the door. Before returning to our individual rooms from the shared space, she spoke to me.

"I had fun today. What about you?"
"Do I have to answer that?"
"We made a promise to say it when we have fun, remember?"

I did remember making such a promise after our visit to the aquarium.
But here, I didn’t want to say it.

"I’ll answer, but come to my room."

With that, I opened the door and walked inside, with Sendai-san following me. Before sitting in my usual spot, I reached for Sendai-san's neck.

"Overall, I think it was fun."

I answered softly, pushing aside the knit sweater covering the mark I'd left on her. Visible was the mark I'd put on her this morning—a red, clear imprint. I traced it with my fingertips, then bit down.

After Sendai-san (IV)

Part 214

The pressure from my teeth softly sinks into Sendai-san's skin at the nape of her neck. Lips press against her soft skin, with my tongue following suit.

Wanting to ensure my Sendai-san, who is in my room today, stays and doesn't go anywhere, I bite down harder and grip her arm more firmly.

"Miyagi."

Her gentle voice reverberates in my ears. I continue applying pressure with my lips as if to tear the skin. Despite expecting her to cry out in pain, Sendai-san does not. Instead, she wraps her arms around my back, embracing me.

The harder I bite, the more tightly the hands on my back draw me close. The warmth emanating from our touching bodies seems to merge with my bloodstream, increasing my body temperature. As I pull my lips away to check her neck, I see the vivid traces I've left.

"Why are you hugging me? Don't you always complain about your clothes stretching or how it hurts?"

I press against her body that holds me, creating a gap.

"My clothes do stretch, and it does hurt, but today's been fun, so I don't mind," she replies with a gentle smile.

"So, it's okay to be bitten if you're having fun?"
"You could've bitten me in the shared space, but you went out of your way to invite me to your room to do it. That makes me happy."
"That's bizarre."
"If you call me a pervert, then it's mostly your fault, Miyagi."

With that, Sendai-san places a hand on my cheek. Her fingers softly trace my skin, grazing against my earring.

"Why did you call me into your room before biting?"
"Because... you seemed really happy today."

Because I wanted to keep Sendai-san confined here in this room. Because I didn't want her to go anywhere.

I don't want to admit that to her, who wouldn't promise to stay away from work or university just to be here. If I voice such an impractical desire, I'd have to face her silence once again.

"What's that about?"
"You don’t need to understand, just sit on the bed."
"Okay, but are you planning to leave another mark?"

Sendai-san obliges and sits quietly on the bed, looking up at me.

"No, I'm not planning to. Get your phone out."

Handing her the bag placed on the floor, a slightly lower voice reaches my ears.

"What are you going to do once it's out?"
"I'll tell you once you get it."

Sendai-san hesitates to retrieve her phone, perhaps anticipating what I might say. Judging by her reluctant expression, it seems she wouldn’t take it out of her bag if I simply waited.

"Sendai-san," I urge her, a slight pressure in my voice urging action.

With a sigh, Sendai-san finally takes her phone out from her bag.

"And now, what happens?"
"Delete all the photos taken today."
"I don't think I've done anything deserving a punishment. Besides, Utsunomiya didn't find out about this."

Sendai-san rubs the spot with the red mark through her knitwear.

"It's not a punishment, but delete them anyway."
"I'm not deleting them."
"Why? You don't need photos."

All the pictures taken today need to be erased.

Even mine.
There's no need for photos capturing Sendai-san and Maika together.
No matter how reluctant, they should all be gone.

"I do need them. They’re memories of today," she says quietly, taking my hand in hers.

"Miyagi, sit down."

Pulled by the hand holding mine, I sit beside her, like a marionette with its strings cut, as Sendai-san displays today's photos on her phone.

"Why would you care about memories from a school festival?"

As each photo appears on the phone screen, I cover it with my hand.

"It's not about the festival. They're memories of you and me. When I look at them, I remember what happened on this day."

"Do you want that, Sendai-san?"
"Don't you, Miyagi?"
"I don’t need memories."

"Then are you going to delete all the photos from today, Miyagi?"

"I..."

I intend to delete them.
I decided to when I came home.

Yet, deleting everything means erasing Sendai-san's photos as well. That would mean losing Sendai-san, captured and confined in my own phone, and I suddenly doubt if I truly want that.

"Miyagi, if you're hesitating, don’t delete them. I don’t want to either."

The phone slips out from under my hand and rests beside Sendai-san.

I still need to delete them.

I don't want to see Sendai-san happily captured together with

Maika, nor do I want to see pictures of Sendai-san and me. Photos, as Sendai-san said, become memories.

They become more tangible and certain than memories etched in the mind.

Unlike the fading and sometimes deteriorating nature of recollection, photos preserve that moment with accuracy. By capturing and retaining time in tangible form, photos become maps of memories, guiding paths to today's recollections. The photos from the school festival would invariably reawaken the possessiveness I felt today, embedded like a stain in those images. They would only serve to make Sendai-san, someone who has become special, even more special.

Thus, they must be deleted.

"Miyagi, look at me."

Being called, my gaze shifts toward Sendai-san. Our eyes meet, and in the next moment, her lips touch my cheek softly. Fingers caress my lips, and I grasp her hand.

"Sendai-san is mine, right?"
"Where did that come from?"
"Answer me."
"You know it without me saying, don’t you?"

"If you don’t say it, I won’t understand."
"…I belong to Miyagi, okay?"
"Then listen to me. Delete the photos."

At my words, Sendai-san falls silent. Even when I pull on her hand, she says nothing. Her gaze falls to the floor before slowly rising back to meet mine after a moment.

"…Then, tell me why you want to keep me as yours. If you tell me, I might delete them."

Her voice reverberates in my ears, dissolving into me, making my heart pound.

I can't tolerate Sendai-san going to work or getting close to people I don’t know. Today, I couldn’t stand how she listened to Maika, nor

could I stand how she laughed beside Maika.

If I trace those feelings, I bump into possessiveness.

The feeling that stubbornly clings to me despite my efforts to peel it off ties to my yearning to keep Sendai-san as mine.

But most likely, Sendai-san has already noticed my emotions.

It's unlikely that she hasn't picked up on feelings that are evident to me. A reason for wanting to keep someone to yourself, outside of possessiveness, hardly exists. Thus, it’s certain this isn’t what Sendai-san wants to understand.

"Miyagi, answer me."

I don’t want to.
I shouldn’t.

What Sendai-san wants to know lies in the root of these emotions, something better left unexplored and undug. Whatever's at the core of this feeling of wanting to confine Sendai-san to this room isn't anything good. It would be better to appease it, let it sleep deep within. Even now, overwhelmed by my own emotions, feeling pain, despair, and confusion, knowing what lies ahead would make staying by Sendai-san's side impossible.

"...If you delete the photos first, then I'll tell you."

The feelings that almost emerged today are crushed and swallowed.

If I make Sendai-san even more special, I fear what might happen to me. If something were to happen where she vanished from my life, I'd be utterly lost.

The words she already knows are sufficient for now.

"If I delete them, are you sure you'll tell me the truth?"

Sendai-san speaks softly, looking at me.

I should say I will tell her.

But I can't bring myself to voice it. Gripping the sheets tightly, her

voice reaches me.

"I won't delete them after all. You don't need to give a reason, Miyagi."
"...Why?"
"Because I want to keep the photos. If you want to delete them, go ahead. But if you do, I'll just send them again."
"Then there's no point in deleting them."
"Exactly."

With that, Sendai-san grabs my hand tightly gripping the sheets. Calling out my name, she leans in closer. Unable to close my eyes, her lips press against mine briefly before pulling away. Her hand then coldly presses against my neck.

"Hey, Miyagi. I want to leave my mark on you too."
"No. I—"
"You're about to say you're not mine, right? I know that much. I'm yours, but you're not mine. That's all the mark signifies."

Interrupting my words, Sendai-san kisses me again.

"You can promise that without leaving a mark."
"On your piercing?"
"Yes."
"Then let me promise on both your piercing and body."

She whispers in my ear, kissing my earring. Without my consent, she lifts the hem of my hoodie, slipping her hand inside.

"I didn't say you could leave a mark or lift my clothes."
"If you don't want me to lift them, then I won't. But that would mean leaving a mark where it's visible. Is that okay?"

Her palm presses against my side, slowly brushing upward. Her lips, like it's second nature, press against my neck, prompting me to push her shoulder away.

"No."
"I can't hear you."

Her lips push against my skin again, lightly sucking. Her hand, which had been pressing against my side, reaches below my ribcage. I slap her hand over my hoodie.

"Stop it, Sendai-san."
"Where would you prefer it—visible or hidden?"
"Neither."
"Miyagi, just say yes once in a while. Let me be with you, even when I'm not physically by your side."

Sendai-san whispers as she trails her lips along my neck, lightly biting my ear. The ticklish feel from her gentle teeth makes me squirm, and when her tongue presses against me, I push her away.

"What do you mean?"
"If I leave a mark, we can be together until it fades."

Her hand, tucked inside my hoodie, softly strokes my side.

"...If it's hidden, then fine."

Leaving her unchecked would likely lead to marks being placed where they're visible, so I accept her proposal.

"Then, lay down."

Reluctantly.
Truly reluctantly, I lie on the bed, and Sendai-san sits beside me.

The hem of my hoodie is lifted, and a chill brushes my exposed stomach. Her hand roams across my now-bare skin, tracing along my ribs, her fingertips gently exploring.

"I didn't say you could touch me."
"Where's a good spot for it? Where do you prefer, Miyagi?"

Her fingertips glide over my belly and side, lifting my hoodie up to my bra.

"If you go any higher, I won't let you leave a mark."
"Got it."

She replies softly, attaching her warmth to my ribs.

Testing with her tongue, it starts lightly but gradually the suction grows stronger. The warmth and sensation blooming from my skin feel good. As I reach out my hand, her hair brushes my fingers,

which I lightly tug.

Her lips don't part.
Still sucking firmly against me until I tug her hair once more, prompting her to finally release. But soon her lips reattach to the same spot, only to withdraw again. Her fingers softly brush my skin as her lips follow.

"That's enough, Sendai-san."
"You did the same thing to me."

I ignore Sendai-san's complaint as I attempt to lower my lifted hoodie, only to have my hand restrained.

"Just a moment."

Sendai-san instructs, and I hear a click.

"Wait, what was that sound?"

Startled, I sit up and see her holding her phone. I recall that she had left it on the bed.

"A memento."

She shows me the screen, where my stomach and the mark she left are displayed. I reach for the phone.

"Delete it."

Even without showing my face, I don’t want a photo of my stomach on someone else's phone.

"I won't delete it."
"Please delete it."
"If you want it deleted, smile next to me like you do when you’re beside Utsunomiya. Then I’ll delete all the photos you want erased."

With a playful grin, Sendai-san pleasantly taunts me.

"All of them?"
"All. But only if you tell me to delete them when the time comes."
"What’s that about?"
"It’s fine, right? Because I’ll delete them."

Her amused tone irritates me.

But it seems it would be difficult to snatch the phone from her grasp, so I choose a solution to prevent an increase in photos.

"...Fine, just, from now on, don't take photos unless I say it's okay."
"I need your permission?"
"Yes."
"Understood."

With that, she whispers "Promise" and places a kiss on my earring.

Chapter 72

Miyagi Doesn't Belong to Me (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 215

After having an early dinner with Mio and parting ways, thirty minutes have passed.

I've been staring at the array of earrings, but I can't find any that surpass the ones adorning my ears. When I initially came to this store to select a gift for Miyagi, the earrings appeared far more dazzling. Although they are still cute and pretty now, they don't shine as brightly as before.

I wonder if there's ever going to be a pair of earrings that truly suits me.

The more I look at the earrings, the more I start to feel that way.
I stroke my neck, where the mark has disappeared, and touch my earrings.

Miyagi is cold.
She seems to have lost interest in the ears I once offered her and doesn't even suggest picking out earrings for me. I can sometimes sense her gaze, but it amounts to nothing more than that.

She's always wanted to pierce my ears since we were in high school.

Just like when I chose my earrings, I wish for Miyagi to select a pair for herself. I want her to place earrings she chose in the holes she pierced herself.

I let out a sigh.

"I should probably head home."

No matter how many hours I spend here, I don't think I'll find anything I desire, nor will I be in a pleasant mood. While I wish to

kill some time, I leave the store where I purchased Miyagi's earrings and head towards the station. On the train, I find myself reminiscing about going to the school festival with Miyagi and touch my neck.

Half of November has already passed.
A turtleneck would be perfect for this time of year, and it wouldn't matter if there were any marks. However, there are no traces of Miyagi on me.

I exit the train at the usual station, my skirt swaying as I walk. Heading home, I climb to the third floor. As I open the door, just as I expected, Miyagi's shoes are absent.

Today, she's at Utsunomiya's house.

Miyagi and I are roommates, but since Miyagi and Utsunomiya are best friends, it's not strange for her to be at Utsunomiya's place. Just as I'm with Miyagi as a roommate, Utsunomiya is with her as a best friend, and it makes perfect sense.

There have been instances like this before, and there will be more in the future. It's not Utsunomiya's fault; it's just how things are. I consider Utsunomiya a friend too, so I have no intention of interfering when a friend wants to meet Miyagi.

I'm just jealous.

I head to the shared space, taking a bottle of barley tea from the fridge. I pour some into a glass and return to my room. I place the glass on the table and sit with my back against the bed.

I take out my phone to check if there are any messages from Miyagi, but there's nothing that matches my expectations. She mentioned she'd be late, but I hope she'd return sooner rather than later.

My hand refuses to part with the phone. Even though I need to work on a report, I'm instead scrolling through photos taken at the festival. I want to set a picture of Miyagi as my lock screen, but if she notices, she'll probably make a fuss. She might even tell me to delete them.

Photos of Miyagi.
Photos of Miyagi and Utsunomiya.
Photos of Miyagi and me.

Photos slide past on my phone, and my hand pauses on one marked with a red dot. On the screen, I gently caress Miyagi's stomach. The red mark must have vanished from Miyagi's body by now, but it's preserved in my phone.

I wish to leave another mark.

I want her to always feel my presence, wherever she may be, and to someday become truly mine. These marks are like reservations for the future and a testament to my desire not to hand her over to anyone else.

Ever since that day, I've been obsessively looking at these photos and pondering such thoughts.

Miyagi implemented this strange rule of marking and suddenly stopped, leaving me tangled in those marks.

"Shiori."

I softly murmur as I swipe Miyagi off the screen.
I open the messaging app and text her, "It's dangerous to be out late." Her quick reply, "I'll be there soon," sends my heart racing. Five minutes later, a commotion from the shared space reaches my ears, followed by a light knock on the door, and Miyagi stands before me as I open it.

"I'm home."
"Welcome back."
"You worry too much. I'm not a child."

A response to the message I sent earlier.

"It's been dangerous out there lately."
"I'll be careful."

As she says this, she seems ready to withdraw to her room, so I seize her arm.

"Let's chat for a bit."
"About what?"
"Just idle talk. You're not busy, right?"

When I tugged on her arm, Miyagi entered my room without resistance, and we settled with our backs against the bed.

"What were you doing, Sendai-san?"
"Mentally preparing to do a report, but ended up just idling."
"Isn't it due?"
"I'll do it later."

I respond curtly and brush my fingers against the earrings I chose for Miyagi. I gently caress them and then softly kiss the earrings, eliciting a puzzled voice from Miyagi.

"What? Was there something you needed to promise?"
"I just wanted to touch them."

I gently stroke the earrings once more.
Miyagi's piercing gaze stops me as I lean in to kiss again, prompting me to finally voice what's been on my mind.

"Hey, Miyagi. Pick out some earrings for me."
"No."
"Why not?"

As I inquire, Miyagi averts her gaze to the floor, falling silent.

"Miyagi?"

When I call softly, Miyagi's fingers fidget hesitantly and snag the platypus tissue cover, dragging it towards her. At her feet, she clasps its tiny hands.

"—I can't pick out cute ones like you do, Sendai-san," she mumbles, releasing the platypus's hands.

"It doesn't have to be cute. Just choose them for me."
"No."

I know there's no malice behind her words.
The fact that Miyagi thinks she can't choose cute earrings is endearing. Yet, hearing her refusal stings a bit. To mend that slight pain, I grasp Miyagi's hand, squeezing it tightly.

"You haven't left any kiss marks lately."

Evading the painful topic, I ask something else that's been on my mind.

"You haven't been going out much, Sendai-san. And they aren't kiss marks."
"I'm only marked when I'm going somewhere?"
"Not exactly the reason, but..."

Miyagi hesitates, loosening her grip, then strokes the platypus's head.

If only she would stroke my head instead.

Eager to draw Miyagi's attention, which keeps wandering away from me upon returning from Utsunomiya's house, I touch her stomach over her clothes.

"Miyagi, can I leave a mark here?"
"No."
"Why not?"
"Just because."
"Give me a reason."

I snatch the platypus from her, grabbing hold of her shirt. As I lift the hem just a little, a small voice reaches my ears saying, "— because it bothers me."

"Then leave a mark on me instead."
"No to that, too."
"If you're against everything, it's time for a penalty game."
"Who's getting punished?"
"You, Miyagi."
"But I did nothing to deserve a punishment."
"You were late coming home."
"I sent you a message."
"But you were late."

Miyagi adhered to the rule of notifying me when she'd be late. So, I'm being unreasonable, and Miyagi doesn't have to accept any penalty. Yet, part of me wishes she'd bend to my whims, if only occasionally.

"It wasn't that late."
"It was. I waited quite a bit for you, Miyagi."

"You were waiting?"
"Yes, I was."

The time spent waiting for Miyagi to come home was too long, so I killed time with Mio, browsing through earrings and eventually scrolling through pictures in place of the real thing that wasn't coming back.

"...So, what does this penalty game entail?"

I'm surprised that Miyagi is even willing to entertain the idea of a penalty game, something I was certain she'd refuse. But I have no intention of letting her words slip away.

"It's just giving orders, like you used to."

I offer something that might pique Miyagi's interest.

"Like I used to?"
"—Tell me to lick your feet."
"You're such a pervert, Sendai-san."
"It's Miyagi who makes me say these things."
"Regardless, I won't give such orders."
"If you won't, then I'll order you to lick my feet, is that okay?"

I know Miyagi would never actually lick my feet.
No matter how much I pleaded, she wouldn't.
Still, despite my certainty, in a small voice, Miyagi says:

"Sit."

She didn't specify where, but by recalling the past, I know where I should be. Miyagi always sat on the bed, and I sat on the floor. So today, I'd sit on the bed while Miyagi would take the floor. I sit on the bed and cross my legs, sure that this arrangement is right.

On the floor, Miyagi looks up at me.

Her fingers glide over my ankle, lifting my skirt up to my knees. She traces her fingers around my knee, following the bone back downwards.

As Miyagi's fingers move, my nerves prick with sensation. The heat that emanates constricts my lungs, suffocating me slightly, and I

exhale a faint breath to steady my pace.

I wonder if Miyagi once felt this way too but immediately dismiss the thought. I can't imagine the Miyagi from back then feeling the same as I do now.

Miyagi only touches my legs and makes no move to lick them.
The stark parting in her black hair, her crown where cowlicks form, is clearly visible and unnerving.

"Miyagi."

I murmur softly, and her hand shifts, lifting my skirt even higher. As my thigh becomes half-exposed, my instinctive reaction is to push the skirt down, prompting an irritable sound from Miyagi.

"Spread your legs a little."
"That's not what I instructed."
"Just do as I say."

Though Miyagi makes no move to lick my feet, she issues orders. Despite supposedly being the one giving orders, I find myself complying and parting my legs, feeling her hand slide along the inside just above my knee.

Feeling the urge to call her Shiori, I bite my lip as Miyagi plants her lips just above my knee, on the inner side.

The heat of her touch elicits a visceral response.
I'm acutely aware of where her lips are pressed, and it's scorching.

Miyagi sucks hard on the inside of my leg.
The sight of her smooth hair and scalp makes me clutch her head, causing her lips to part from my skin. Where her lips once were, I'm startled by the blatant red mark left behind.

"I don't recall giving an order like that."

The order was to lick my feet, not to leave a kiss mark.
As I move to lower my lifted skirt, Miyagi halts my hand.

"You said you wanted me to leave a mark."
"Leaving a mark and giving an order are two separate things."
"What's the difference?"

Miyagi nonchalantly states, gently stroking the red imprint she left on my skin.

Miyagi Doesn't Belong to Me (II)

Part 216

Miyagi is so selfish.

She doesn’t consider my feelings about leaving marks in such a conspicuous place. Yet, I'm the one who always forgives her, unable to ever firmly stop her.

"Miyagi, you want me to stay as your roommate, right?"

I catch her hand as it caresses the inside of my thigh and pull my skirt back down. I doubt she would take it any further, but letting her linger like this could unravel my last threads of rational thought.

"Yeah, I do."

"Then, behave like a roommate, will you?"

With a sigh, I release her hand and get off the bed, sitting beside her and hugging my knees. Lately, what she's been doing to me has been far beyond the bounds of simple roommate behavior.

Roommates don’t leave kiss marks on each other’s inner thighs, not like today.

Even though I might want it, that’s just me misinterpreting what it means to be roommates. Miyagi, who prefers to stay within those boundaries, really shouldn’t push past them. I believe she should stop me.

"You’re not exactly a model roommate yourself," Miyagi retorts in a slightly lower voice, tugging at my skirt.

"I'm trying within reasonable limits."

I want to be more than just roommates, yet I also cling to the idea of being roommates that Miyagi seems to need.

Miyagi is unpredictable at times. I'm unsure of what would happen if I forcibly dragged her out of the realm of being mere roommates. That makes me hesitant.

Nonetheless, I want to expand the definition of 'roommate' enough for Miyagi to accept it. Wanting to transform her ephemeral feelings into something tangible makes my efforts half-hearted.

"Trying within limits wouldn't include telling me to lick your feet or trying to lick mine."

"But I stopped at that, didn't I? I am being considerate."

If it were permissible, I'd push her onto the bed and press my lips over every part of her body, spending the night intertwined. However, I quell these impure desires within me and respect her wishes.

To put it bluntly, it's my lack of courage that keeps my rationality in check. Therefore, I wish she wouldn't forget that and provoke my sensibilities.

I realize my inconsistency, but I am not the only one acting irrationally.

"What more were you planning beyond 'stopping at that'?"

"I'll tell you if you want to know, but do you?"

"No need."

Her voice echoes with discontent, and I gaze steadily at her.

"You can leave a kiss mark, but at least let me choose the spot."

The marks she's left numerous times have become an expected presence on me. Whether they're there or not, I still feel their absence. If she keeps marking places like earlier, I might start expecting more than just marks, and I'd rather not. But if it's a different spot, I'd like her to.

"I told you, it's not a kiss mark," she insists.

"Then let me choose where you put those marks."

"…Where then?"

"Where do you want to put them, Miyagi?"

Quietly asking, her hand reaches to my neck.

"You left a mark at the school festival here too, right? It's quite visible."

"I like it here."

"Is there a reason you want it somewhere so noticeable?"

"…Because you're mine, Sendai-san. So I can do what I like."

Her hand withdraws, replaced by her lips, which slowly suck at the skin, deciding tomorrow's outfit for me.

This ritual, difficult for me to resist, turns into something I willingly offer up to her, driven by her words.

Miyagi saying I'm 'hers' feels almost tantamount to hearing her say she loves me.

I know it's just a one-sided claim from Miyagi, who has no intention of being mine. It's like chocolate—appearing sweet but not, yet I still want to hear it repeatedly. I'm willing to have marks left in conspicuous places just for those words.

I comb through her hair near my neck, dark strands sliding through my fingers as her lips pull at my skin.

How long will this mark linger?

As I ponder this, her lips part, and Miyagi's fingers trace the newly placed mark.

"Miyagi, can I leave a mark on you too?"

Grabbing the fingers on my neck, I ask a question for which I already know the answer.

"No."

"I thought as much. You're not mine, after all."

Releasing her hand, I touch Miyagi's earring, tracing the plumeria flower and kissing her ear.

The earrings I picked for her, wishing her happiness.

There's a clear difference between when I chose these earrings and now. While Miyagi won't become mine, she wants to make me hers. It's a significant step forward, making me feel like we're growing closer. For now, that's enough.

I could forgive Miyagi for not liking me, but I thought I couldn't forgive Miyagi for liking anyone other than me. But the closer I get to her, the harder it is to forgive Miyagi for not liking me, let alone accept her liking anyone other than me.

Still, I can maintain the status quo. I believe I can, but a bit of something tangible would be nice.

"Miyagi, if you're going to keep calling me yours, then take responsibility and manage me properly."

"What do you mean by 'manage'? Is there a need for me to manage you, Sendai-san?"

"There is. Make it apparent that I'm yours."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Put the collar back on."

"I've never put a collar on you."

"Yes, you have."

I stand and retrieve an accessory case from the dresser, taking out a pendant Miyagi gave me.

"You haven't forgotten this, right? The collar you gave me back in high school."

I show her the pendant hanging from its chain, a small moon-

themed charm swinging gently.

"That's a necklace, not a collar."

"It's a collar. You gave it to me in that sense, didn't you?"

"…Why would you think that?"

"Why indeed? Maybe ask your own heart?"

Jabbing lightly at her chest, she swats my hand away. As she reaches for the pendant, I conceal it in my palm before she can take it.

"This pendant—you picked it yourself, right?"

A dissatisfied sound leaves her lips as she responds, and I meet her gaze while keeping the pendant clutched in my grasp.

"Yeah, I did."

"Then choose earrings for me too."

"Why are we talking about this all of a sudden?"

"Because you don't seem keen on me wearing the pendant again. If you pick them, I'd be okay with earrings."

"I'm not asking you to wear the necklace, and I'm not choosing earrings either."

"Then how do you plan on managing me?"

"That's..."

Miyagi faltered, her gaze dropping to the floor.

Whether she realized it or not, she hadn't denied the idea of "managing". This implies that deep down, she does want to manage me. The meaning is embedded within the word "mine."

"I'm fine with giving all of myself to you, Miyagi, but just giving without receiving is unfair, right? You don't have to buy them, but at least choose some accessories for me."

Reaching out, I traced her earrings and lightly tugged on her earlobe. While I offered accessories as an option, I wouldn't mind even a real collar if Miyagi picked it out.

"...If I choose the earrings, that’s fine then, right?"

She spoke reluctantly, meeting my gaze.

"That’s perfectly fine."

I smiled at her, and she took a sip of my now lukewarm barley tea.

Miyagi Doesn't Belong to Me (III)

Part 217

"Sendai-sensei, do you like those earrings?"

In the familiar room, Kikyo-chan stares intently at my ears from across the table.

"I'm thinking of buying new ones, but it's hard to find a nice pair," I reply.

On the ears I had given to Miyagi, there are small earrings. They've been there since her birthday and are supposed to be replaced soon. But, despite Miyagi saying she'd pick out earrings, over a week has passed without her doing so.

"I want to get my ears pierced too, once I get into high school," Kikyo-chan says quietly, her gaze falling to her workbook.

"The school will get mad at you," I caution.
"I guess so. But getting them pierced as a celebration for passing sounds cool," she muses.
"It is cool, but maybe you should consider something else? If you get into high school, I'll give you a present," I offer.
"Really?"

Kikyo-chan leans in, setting her clasped pen down, with her slightly long bangs swaying, making her sparkly eyes clearly visible.

"It's true. I can't buy anything expensive, but I'll get something you want, so start thinking about it."
"Okay!"

She responds with a cheerful voice.
The workbook pages turn with vigor, and it's clear that her motivation has spiked just from the mention of a present. It's adorable and typical of a junior high student, refreshingly different from Miyagi.

When I was teaching high school Miyagi, I never saw such an

enthusiastic response like Kikyo-chan's.

I wish I could have seen a jubilant Miyagi like Kikyo-chan back then. Miyagi was cute even when sullen, but the Miyagi who smiled at the penguins at the aquarium was also charming. I can't help but think it would've been wonderful if such a spirited Miyagi had been beside the high school me.

"Sensei, about this part."

Kikyo-chan's voice pulls me from my Miyagi-tinged thoughts, directing my attention to the problem she's pointing at.

"Like this," I say, explaining, and before I know it, we've gone over both today's lesson and the school's class prep, with time flying by like a breeze.

After parting ways with Kikyo-chan, I ride the train heading home.

Tutoring often reminds me of high school Miyagi. This job can be nostalgic and entertaining. Persuading Miyagi to let me take on one more student might not be a bad idea.

I get off the train, walking in the cold wind. The end of autumn, the beginning of winter, the night air feels stark on my bare neck. It's cold enough that even a light coat feels unreliable. Eager to see Miyagi, I walk quickly, ascending the three flights of stairs to the front door.

I remove my shoes and head to the shared space, but Miyagi is nowhere to be found.

After placing my coat and bag in my room, I return to the shared space. I knock on Miyagi's door three times, and after a brief pause, I hear a click as the door opens.

"Welcome back."
"I'm home. Can I come in?"
"You can."

With a nonchalant voice, the door opens wider. Stepping into the comfortably warm room, heated by the air conditioner, I notice a few books on the desk indicating she was studying. I unbutton my blouse, sitting beside Miyagi.

"Hey, Miyagi. When will you pick out those earrings for me?"

I tug at Miyagi's ear as she leans against the bed.

"When, you ask? I just said I'd choose them a little while ago."
"I've been waiting over a week."
"Sendai-san, aren't you a bit impatient? I'd like to take my time."
"Well, take your time, but how about we go look at earrings together? I'll buy them, and all you have to do is choose."

I know I should wait.
It would be better to let her take her time and choose when she feels like it. Like a stray cat, she's fickle, and no amount of urging will make her move according to my plans.

I understand all that, but as the wait drags on, it starts to feel as if the day Miyagi promised to choose earrings was just a figment of my imagination.

"I'm not going. I'll choose and buy them myself. So, you just wait, Sendai-san."

Miyagi's unexpected response surprises me.

"I can buy them myself, really. Like I said earlier, you just have to choose them for me."
"I'll choose, and I'll buy them."

Miyagi states clearly and turns the air conditioner up another degree. It was cold outside, but in this room, it's more than warm enough. I reach over to take the remote from her and place it on the bed.

"When should I wait until?"
"Until I've bought them."

Facing her vague answer, I fidget with my earrings. Feeling the small adornment against my fingers, I trace the earring slowly.

"If that's what Miyagi prefers, I'll wait, but maybe I can get something in place of the earrings."
"What do you mean by 'in place of'?"

I withdraw my hand from my ear, brushing it across Miyagi's lips in a probing voice.

"Leave a mark. You can do that right away, can't you?"
"...Where would I put this mark?"
"Anywhere you'd like, Miyagi."

I declare softly, and she gives me a look as if examining something suspicious.

"Weren't you saying the other day that you wanted to choose the spot?"
"I did say that, but today, you can mark anywhere you want. In return, let me make a mark on the same spot."

I don't need to hear her answer — I already know it.
So, before she can say "no," I press my lips against hers, stealing her words. Grasping her hand to prevent resistance, I feel the pleasant warmth spreading from where our lips meet and our hands are joined. Yearning for more of Miyagi, I touch her lips with my tongue, trying to push further, but she promptly bites hard and pushes me away.

"Sendai-san, I didn't hear anything about this turning into a system where not choosing earrings quickly leads to this."

Her annoyed voice reaches me.

"I just decided on it now. It's Miyagi's fault for not picking out the earrings already."
"That's unfair."
"Does Miyagi not want to leave a mark?"

Inquiring softly, the hand I was holding slips away from mine.
Miyagi's fingers skim the floor and pull lightly on my blouse.

"...Sendai-san, are you really going to put a mark in the same place?"
"I will. So, consider carefully before you mark."

I've had kiss marks placed on me multiple times.
It's nothing to hesitate about now, having become part of what we can do while maintaining our roommate relationship. It's up to Miyagi to choose the spot, and given that I've marked her before, it shouldn't be a big problem if I do it too.

Thus, I think it’s fine to test Miyagi a little.

I want to know, in times like these, where Miyagi would like to receive a kiss and touch.
It might be an indirect way.
But if I were straightforward, she’d never give me an answer.

"Have you decided?"

Asking quietly, Miyagi frowns slightly and answers, "Not yet."

"Would it be better if I took off my clothes?"
"Not necessary."
"Hurry up. You're overthinking."

I urge her, pulling her earlobe gently and pressing into the earring with my fingers.

"Let go."

At the sharpness of her voice, I withdrew my hand from her ear. Miyagi proceeded to unbutton two more buttons on my blouse. With three buttons undone, her hand slipped inside the blouse, gently tracing my shoulder and then following down the line of my collarbone. Slowly, she opened my blouse wider.

Miyagi Doesn't Belong to Me (IV)

Part 218

Despite her tendency to hesitate, Miyagi never holds back.

In the end, she unbuttons my blouse entirely and just stares at me.

There’s no sense of consideration in her gaze. Even though I’m wearing a camisole, the thought of being ogled makes me uneasy.

"I told you to mark me, not just look."

I address Miyagi as her eyes linger on my chest.

"Just stay quiet while I do it."

"Okay, okay."

In response to my comment, Miyagi's finger traces the strap of my camisole.

But she doesn't seem intent on leaving any kiss marks. She merely looks at me and lets her fingers caress my body.

This moment, where I can command all of Miyagi’s attention and gaze, isn’t all bad. It's embarrassing to be looked at so intently, yet knowing she's focused solely on me makes me wish this time would last.

"Sendai-san."

When she calls me in a reserved voice and I answer with "What?", Miyagi softly caresses my chest through the camisole.

"You'll mark where I do, right?"

"That's right. Have you decided?"

"Almost."

Her voice is small, and I feel a slight shift of the strap like she's about to undress me, causing me to tense momentarily. But her hand halts hesitantly, pressing above my chest still hidden by the camisole.

"I'll mark here."

With that declaration, Miyagi presses her lips to the spot.

My skin gets sucked hard, as if drawing warmth from my body.

I'm acutely aware of being marked by Miyagi, feeling the sensation concentrating where her lips meet my skin. Our bodies, much like oil and water, refuse to completely mix, yet the touched parts feel like they want to meld with hers.

I stroke her hair, holding her head closer.

Her lips press firmly into my skin, then eventually pull away.

"It's done."

Miyagi murmurs, escaping my arms.

I glance just above my underwear to see a small mark.

Her fingers trace the fresh mark before withdrawing.

"Is just one mark enough for you?"

"Yes, it is."

"The last one you left faded, you know. You can redo it if you want."

The red mark that had been on the inside of my thigh had vanished. It came about when she couldn’t follow my request to lick my feet. Kiss marks don't last forever. They fade with time, getting absorbed into me until I crave them anew. Thus, if she wishes to make another, she should do as she likes.

"If I redo it, Sendai-san will mark the same place, right?" Miyagi says in a low voice.

"Of course."

"Then I won’t."

"Alright, then, Miyagi, take off your sweatshirt."

Upon my words, she obediently removes it, leaving her in just her cutout top.

"And that too."

I yank at her top.

"Eh, why?"

"You can’t be marked with it on."

Miyagi's earlier kiss mark was placed slightly above my chest. It was a spot that couldn’t have been reached with my blouse buttoned up, nor when wearing a top. To place one in the same spot, she’d need to remove her shirt.

"You can do it without taking it off."

"No, I can't. Just take it off."

"I refuse."

"If you don’t want to remove it, I'll do it for you."

Removing a top isn’t something new; after all, my blouse had been unbuttoned, so Miyagi should at least oblige by taking off her top.

"I don't want that either."

"You can’t be marked otherwise."

"You're the only one who thinks that, Sendai-san."

"Miyagi."

I let go of the hem I’d been pulling with a firm address. A disgruntled voice reaches my ears.

"Then, Sendai-san, you take yours off too."

"I don’t mind, but what about you?"

"I’ll take it off myself."

"That's fine, just take it off first."

Her words are just as I expected, and I don’t hesitate to comply. However, a part of me worries she’d not follow through on the deal once I undress first.

I watch Miyagi.

The accuracy of my prediction shows as she doesn’t make a move to undress.

"If you won’t take it off, I’ll just place the kiss mark somewhere visible, alright?"

Upon my calm inquiry, Miyagi frowns but reluctantly sheds her top, revealing just her underwear beneath.

"Sendai-san, satisfied now?"

"Yes. I'll hold onto this."

Before she can respond, I hide her shirt behind my back. And before her complaints start, I honor our agreement by removing my blouse.

"Take this off too."

Miyagi tugs at my camisole.

Well, that’s only fair.

Removing my blouse wouldn’t suffice. I quietly strip off the camisole as well, leaving only my bra.

But even then, Miyagi doesn’t seem entirely appeased.

"Give me back my clothes."

"Only after the marking."

I glance at Miyagi's exasperated face.

The white undergarment shielding her modest chest catches my gaze.

My heart races.

My heartbeat roars almost painfully making it hard to breathe. I have seen Miyagi like this before, yet I find myself unbearably tense.

It’s only with her that I get this way; Miyagi is someone irreplaceably special to me.

"Stop staring and get on with it."

When I retort to her low voice with, "You were staring too," she glares back.

I brush the strap of her bra.

Its simple design is rather typical of Miyagi, though something cuter wouldn’t hurt.

"If you’re not marking me, I’ll put my clothes back on."

Her voice carries irritation, though she doesn’t appear furious. I’d like to keep watching her, but if I overdo it, I might get chased out of this room before I finish.

I trace my fingers just above her chest where Miyagi marked me.

It’s where she wanted her mark and where I am permitted to leave mine.

I press my lips onto that same spot, pushing against it strongly, claiming that piece of skin entirely.

I want the memory of me to linger with her as long as possible, to ensure this spot becomes special, so that I can remain on Miyagi's body for as long as possible, before I finally release her skin from my lips.

"Miyagi, can I put another one?"

I ask while running my fingers over the fresh red mark.

"I only left one."

"But I'd let you mark the same spot too."

"Sendai-san, your lack of shame worries me. You're thinking of marking a weird spot, aren't you?"

"I told you before, I feel embarrassed sometimes too."

I counter her accusation, but she casts a skeptical eye on me.

"You sure don't seem like you do."

"I do, really."

"Then where exactly do you want to mark?"

I lower my gaze to Miyagi's legs.

Given permission, I'd love to press my lips onto her inner thigh, leaving a red mark, trailing kisses to her foot, then tracing with my tongue.

"The spot where you marked me before."

"Even knowing it'll be overwritten?"

"I'd like it there again."

"You're such an erotic demon, Sendai-san."

I let out a small sigh at being called by the unflattering nickname.

"Then if I won't do it there again, where would you want me to mark?"

"...Take this off."
Miyagi tugs at my bra strap as she asks.

"Do you mean a spot that would require undressing to mark?"

"Is that a problem?"

"It seems like I'm not the only erotic one here."

"Not quite as much as you, Sendai-san. Now, give me back my clothes."

With that, Miyagi extends her hand, signaling her impatience.

"I'll give them back if you let me mark you where I want," I propose, thinking it isn't such a bad offer. Yet her response is a cold rebuff.

"Give me back my clothes."

"I won't."

"Sendai-san, give them back."

Miyagi steps closer, reaching for the clothes hidden behind my back, prompting me to pull her into an embrace. Though still wearing a bra, the skin-to-skin contact without any barrier is warm, intimate, and ultimately, misleading.

The sensation is warm, maybe a little too warm, and with it comes a mix of impure thoughts.

"Sendai-san, it's too hot. Let go," she murmurs, her words against my ear a soft tickle. When I tighten my hold around her, she pinches my side.

"If you let me mark you, anywhere you want, I'll let you go."

"...Sendai-san."

"What?"

Predicting her next words, I let out a soft sigh, wanting to delay the inevitable.

"You told me manage you, but is it okay for me to be the one to manage you?"

Miyagi asks something unexpected.

"It's okay."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to choose my earrings."

"—Is it really just for that?"

She probes gently and pushes me back. The heat from our joined skin evaporates, leaving me suddenly feeling adrift.

"Yes, that's all. So please, choose quickly."

Though the room’s temperature seems unchanged, I feel as though it's cooled. I capture Miyagi’s hand, softly kissing her fingertips, a small sound escaping her lips.

“…I don’t know what kind of earrings would suit you, Sendai-san.”

"Anything will do."

"No, it's important. Unlike the necklace which isn't visible, earrings are."

The pendant from high school had to be hidden, as did any marks on my body. But earrings don’t require concealment. I want to wear something from Miyagi in a visible place.

"It's good that it's visible."

"... Sendai-san, you’re beautiful."

"Eh?"

The words spoken in a barely audible voice were unexpected, and I let out a dumbfounded sound.

"I can’t pick something weird."

She mutters while dropping her gaze.

"How—" I begin to ask what she meant, but before I can continue, the clothes I was hiding are snatched away. As I stared blankly at Miyagi getting dressed, her hand brushes over my mark again. Then she presses her lips just below it, sucking hard on the skin and

leaving a new mark.

"Miyagi, I'll mark you in that new spot."

"No."

Miyagi's obstinate hand continues to trace the new mark, even moving lower.

This isn't good.

I'd want to remove my bra and let her leave a mark regardless of the absence of an agreement.

I want to reciprocate in the same way with Miyagi.

Through marking with kisses, I had been disguising my wicked feelings, but it seems I can't keep it up much longer.

"Miyagi, keep your promise."

At my words, she looks up.

"I'll choose your earrings properly."

"That, and the other promise."

"The other one?"

"Yes. You remember that promise from the day you told me to say how good it felt, like some pervert, right?"

"...I'm not a pervert."

"The promise that you'd let me do it to you next time. If you remember that, I might consider you not a pervert."

The day I was blindfolded and allowed Miyagi to touch me. She had said I could do the same.

"That wasn't a promise for the next time to be initiated by you, Sendai-san."

"But it was."

"...Sendai-san, you'll stay as my roommate, right?"

Her tone suggests she doesn't want to honor the agreement.

"We can still do it as roommates."

I state clearly, meeting Miyagi's gaze. If she prefers things to remain undefined, that's fine. I want to be whatever she desires. Yet, I want to bring our vague promise to fruition.

"I'll keep the promise someday."

"…When is someday?"

"Someday is someday."

With those words, I press a kiss to Miyagi's earring.

Chapter 73

A Way Not to Offend Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 219

Earrings, earrings, earrings. No matter what I do, I can't get the thought of earrings out of my head.

Today, I came to watch a movie with Maika and Asakura-san, but all I could do was stare at the ears on the screen.

November has passed, and we are already in December.

I need to choose earrings soon. No matter how much I hesitate or think, it's not like I'm going to change. Since I can't possibly choose the earrings that Sendai-san would think are nice, I should just give up and make a quick decision, yet I keep hesitating and contemplating.

It might be easier to just choose a collar and give it to her.

A beautiful red collar. Black might also work. I'm sure it would suit Sendai-san well.

She might get angry and say I'm being ridiculous, though.

"Shiori, are you stopping by here?"

Maika's voice snaps me back to reality, and I realize I've paused my steps. In front of me is a store that sells imported goods, and I touch my ear.

Wasn't the store where Sendai-san bought my earrings like this?

This place is in the station building where the cinema is, so it's not the same store where Sendai-san bought my earrings. But the atmosphere is quite similar.

"Is it okay if we stop by?"

I ask Maika and Asakura-san, and they both reply, "Sure," so we head inside. It's a typical Sunday afternoon with some people around. We pass by stuffed animals, small accessories, check out bags, and finally arrive in front of the earrings. Just like the store I went to with Sendai-san, there are plenty of earrings here, but I still can't figure out which ones would suit her.

"Shiori, are you going to buy some earrings?"

Maika asks as she looks at the earrings beside me.

"I don't know if I'll buy any, just seeing if there's something pretty."

"So it's not cute, but pretty?"

"Well, cute is fine too..."

I don't have a specific design preference for earrings. Something cute would do, but I feel like something pretty rather than cute would suit Sendai-san more.

"Hmm."

While Maika hums and looks at the rows of earrings, she says, "These are cute," pointing to earrings shaped like four-leaf clovers.

"They really are."

I'm not lying when I say this. The earrings Maika pointed at are indeed cute. They just don’t match the image I have of Sendai-san.

It makes me recall the necklace I gave her back in high school.

I thought that necklace would suit Sendai-san well, so I gave it to her, but since it was something that would be hidden, I didn't worry much about whether it actually suited her.

I pick up one earring from the many on display to take a closer look. Earrings are something that declares ownership, visible to everyone.

They're different from the necklace of back then.

So, I want to choose something that doesn't diminish Sendai-san. Even if she wears the earrings I give her, Sendai-san should remain the same Sendai-san as always.

"Earrings are nice, aren't they? They're cute," Asakura-san comments thoughtfully. I put down the earrings I picked up and ask the earring-less Asakura-san, "Don't you want them, Asakura-san?"

"I like them, but I'm scared they'd snag on something and tear my ear."

"Saying that makes it sound like it really might happen, which is scary."

After lightly tapping Asakura-san on the arm for her plausible concern, Maika giggles.

"Shiori, you're quite the scaredy-cat, huh?"

"I don't like pain."

"Of course, but it's not like your ears would tear so easily."

"They might just tear, you know?"

Asakura-san says in a serious voice, and Maika laughs, "It'll be fine." While talking about silly matters like whether ears would tear or not, we start walking again.

"Shiori, are you sure you don't want to buy any earrings?"

"It's fine. I didn't find any I liked."

I didn't find any earrings that seemed to suit Sendai-san, and even if I had, I wouldn't want to buy them in front of Maika or others.

"Oh, right. I wanted to ask you two something. Do you have plans on the 24th, Christmas Eve?"

In response to Maika's cheerful inquiry, I reply, "I don't."

"I'm working."

"Asakura-san, you're working on Christmas too?"

"There's nothing I particularly want to do, so I thought I'd just work."

Asakura-san answers Maika as though it's only natural.

"I see. We said we'd do a gift exchange on Christmas, didn't we, Shiori?"

When I nod at her glance, Maika continues speaking.

"In that case, I thought it might be fun if we all gathered at my place to do something. I should have said it sooner."

"Invite me next year. I might still be working, though."

Asakura-san laughs lightly.

"Alright, I'll ask earlier next time."

Maika replies brightly and looks at me.

"Do you know Sendai-san's plans?"

"What?"

I reflexively ask back to the unexpected mention of her name.

"I was thinking of inviting Sendai-san too, but she probably already has plans for Christmas, right? I should have asked sooner."

Sendai-san's Christmas plans.

I never really thought about that. Since Christmas has always been just another day, not particularly joyful for me, I never paid much attention to my own plans, or anyone else's for that matter. So, I never considered being invited by Maika to gather on Christmas as a possibility.

But it's normal, generally speaking, to hang out with friends on Christmas. Considering that, it wouldn't be strange for Sendai-san to have plans with friends. Actually, it would be odd if she didn't have any plans. The words Asakura-san said earlier come back to mind.

Work.

Sendai-san mentioned she wanted to work more during the winter break, so even if she doesn't have plans to hang out with friends, she might be working.

"Well, I'll contact her just in case. She might not have plans."

Though Christmas isn't special to me, I'd be upset if Sendai-san had plans. But if she doesn't, it'd end up being just the three of us meeting.

Meeting Maika is fun. I think we could enjoy Christmas. Despite that, the thought of Sendai-san meeting Maika on Christmas doesn't sit well with me.

"When I get back, I'll ask Sendai-san."

I can't tell Maika not to contact her. I don't know how Christmas will go, but I want to be the first to know her plans.

"Okay, please do."

"Yeah."

After a short reply, I hear Asakura-san speak up.

"Miyagi-san, you live with Sendai-san, right?"

"Yeah."

"Like I mentioned before, since you two are so different and seem to have no common ground, it feels a bit strange. I'd probably get nervous if I meet her again."

As she said, she mentioned something similar after the school festival. Though she's probably not joking when she says she'd get nervous if they met, Maika quickly denies that notion.

"I used to think she was someone from a distant world back in high school, but once you talk to her, it's nothing like that. I think you'd actually enjoy meeting her. Right, Shiori?"

"Yeah, well, she's kind."

"She's kind?"

Asakura-san looks at me.

"She helped me with my studies back in high school."

"Oh, that’s unexpected."

Asakura-san remarks, then adds, "I'm feeling hungry now."

"What's Miyagi-san and Utsunomiya-san doing after this? Want to grab a bite before heading back?"

It’s been quite some time since we watched the movie, and it's already evening. It might be a bit early for dinner, but it's not surprising to feel hungry.

"Sounds good. What about you, Shiori?" Maika asks cheerfully, looking at me.

"Sorry, I'm a bit tied up today."

"Got plans with Sendai-san?"

"Yeah, something like that."

Sendai-san is out today, just like me, so we haven't planned anything specific. Still, she mentioned having dinner at home.

I part ways with the two and board the train. In the gently swaying car, I pull out my smartphone and display a photo of Sendai-san, focusing on her ears.

Since the day she pierced her ears, she's worn a silver adornment.

Changing it to the earrings I choose. By doing so, it won’t just be something that remembers the promise of her birthday; it will become something that solidifies her belonging to me, managing her, ensuring she remains mine for good.

—But. It feels like it also means that I, too, belong to her.

In my ears, I wear the earrings she picked out for me.

If choosing and swapping her earrings ties her to me in some way, it's not strange to think that the earrings attached to my ears carry the same significance.

Perhaps such a meaning doesn't actually exist, but it's something that weighs on my mind. I touch my ears and caress the earrings.

Although I'm not owned by Sendai-san, these earrings are precious. They hold the role of keeping the promises made with her, so they must stay where they are.

I put my phone away and allow the train to continue rocking me gently. Stepping off at my usual station, I make my way back home.

Winter means early nights. The wind bites, prompting me to tuck my hands into my coat pockets, and I unconsciously begin to walk faster.

Climbing the stairs to the third floor and opening the front door, I see Sendai-san's shoes. I shut the door and head towards the shared space, where I find Sendai-san looking into the fridge. I call out, "I'm home."

"Welcome back. How was the movie?" she asks, shutting the fridge and approaching me.

"It was okay."

"Miyagi, what about the earrings?"

Sendai-san reaches a hand out and lightly brushes my earrings with her fingers.

"Still haven't chosen."

She asks for something obvious, and I kick her foot lightly in response.

"Are you hesitant about wanting to mark me, so you haven't picked any earrings?"

"That's not it."

Whenever I answer "I haven't chosen" to her inquiry of "Earrings?", another mark appears, one on her body and one on mine. Although it wasn't a formal agreement, since the day we first marked each other, we have continued this practice on occasion.

I trace the outline of Sendai-san's neck with my finger, slightly pulling down the neckline of her knitted top.

Pressing my lips against the spot beneath her collarbone, hidden under her clothes, I firmly draw on her skin. Her arms wrap around my back, holding me loosely, and warmth spreads through my body, not only from my lips but also from her touch.

I maintain the suction long enough to leave a mark before releasing my lips and gently biting the spot to confirm the red impression.

When her arms unwind and she steps back, she mirrors my actions by placing her lips on the same area where I left my mark.

That familiar sensation of being strongly sucked on. The shared fragrance of our shampoo from her hair.

All these things feel so good that it makes me want to touch Sendai-san even more.

As her lips release and her tongue trails over my skin, it tickles, sending shivers down my spine, prompting me to push her away. But almost immediately, her hands find their way to caress my ears and trace my neck, so I retaliate by stepping firmly on her foot.

"You don't need to be so on guard," she says, sounding annoyed.

"I do."

Of course, I do. The words "someday" that Sendai-san mentioned linger in my mind. Although I never agreed, I know she plans to eventually touch me at her convenience, and not knowing when that "someday" will come leaves me on edge.

"Don't worry, 'someday' is still 'someday.' But if you have a preferred date, I'll take requests?"

"No need to ask."

If you're going to ask, I'd rather you listen to me instead of requests. Although reluctant, I must ask about her plans for Christmas. But before I can mention that, Sendai-san starts speaking.

"Miyagi, help me with dinner prep."

"What are we making?"

"This," she says, opening the refrigerator.

A Way Not to Offend Sendai-san (II)

Part 220

In front of me are two bowls. Both were taken out of the refrigerator by Sendai-san, and each contains a mix of kneaded ground meat. Though I'm unsure why there are two bowls, there's only one thing that comes to mind given the contents.

"Hamburg steak?"
"Wrong answer."

Her voice replies cheerfully.

"Then, what are we making?"
"Gyoza. Inside of the bowls are the gyoza filling I made before Miyagi came back. There are two types: shiso and cheese."

Sendai-san places the bowls on the table and looks at me.

"Gyoza? You're going through the trouble of making them?"
"Yep. They're ready to be wrapped and just need to be cooked."
"We could have just bought pre-made ones."
"I wanted gyoza without garlic."
"You can find those in stores if you look."
"Sure, but it's more fun to make them together."
"…I'll go put my bag away."

I hadn't agreed to help with dinner prep, but Sendai-san assumed I would, speaking as if it were a given. So, I head to my room to put away my coat and bag. Returning to the shared space, I wash my hands and join her. Instinctively, one of the bowls is placed in front of me.

"You handle the shiso ones, Miyagi."

She hands me a spoon, and I stare at the contents of the bowl.

Sendai-san always likes to make things from scratch and insists others join in. We've made things like fried chicken and cookies together before—all of which you could easily buy from a store. I've

always been used to buying those ready-made items.

Gyoza are no different. For me, gyoza meant the ready-made, frozen or chilled kinds—not something you make from wrapping the filling yourself.

I find it tedious.

I don't understand why Sendai-san insists on making everything from scratch. But somehow, whatever she makes always turns out delicious, prompting me to help her despite finding it bothersome.

"I've never made them before and don't know how to wrap them."

Besides the bowls, there's also a small dish of water and some gyoza wrappers on the table. I pick up a wrapper and glance at Sendai-san.

"Then put about a spoonful of filling right in the center of the wrapper."
"Like this?"

Following her instructions, I place a spoonful of filling in the middle of the wrapper.

"That's it. Next, moisten the edges of the wrapper with water and pinch the right end. Then, create pleats as you seal it, working from the edges inward. It's simple, right?"

She demonstrates how to wrap the filling, but it’s hard to grasp. I can see she’s folding the edges to create pleats, but just understanding it doesn’t mean I can replicate it. Nonetheless, I try folding the edges to create pleats.

"…It ripped."

I don't know why. I managed to wrap the filling, but the wrapper tore, exposing the contents.

"Try using less filling."

Taking her advice, I use a slightly smaller amount of filling, wrapping it in the center of the wrapper. It results in a misshapen gyoza—not as neat as Sendai-san's.

Maybe it's because of the pleats.

I take another wrapper, place the filling in the center, fold it into a square, and show it to Sendai-san.

"That's more like a square crepe than a gyoza. Try it with fewer pleats."
"Pleats or no pleats, it’s the same once you eat it. This is fine."

I make another square gyoza and set it on the plate.

"…Miyagi, you're clumsy."
"I'm not clumsy."
"Well, make them however you like. Torn ones, misshapen ones, or crepe-like ones, they're all cute."

Sendai-san giggles at my gyoza, which irritates me.

I stomp on her foot gently, recalling something important.

This isn’t the time to be leisurely making gyoza.

There's something I need to tell Sendai-san. After making another pleated, awkward-looking gyoza, I take a breath and then put more filling in the center of a wrapper. Before sealing it, I ask in a voice neither loud nor soft.

"Do you have any plans for Christmas?"

At my words, Sendai-san pauses her gyoza-making.

"Christmas? The 25th?"
"The 24th."
"That's Christmas Eve."
"What does it matter? Do you have plans or not? Just answer."

I find myself speaking slightly faster, as if I asked something special. Inquiring about Christmas plans shouldn't be significant. Yet I can't bring myself to look at her, so I continue sealing the gyoza awkwardly, unable to make proper pleats.

"I'm free."

Her quiet response lets me exhale. Placing the misshapen gyoza on

the plate, I quickly spit out what needs to be said.

"Maika wants us to meet up, the three of us."
"…Utsunomiya wants to?"

Her voice is stiffer than usual.

"Yeah."
"What did you tell her?"
"That I have no plans."
"So, you're meeting Utsunomiya on the 24th?"
"Yeah."

A feeling submerged deep within me surfaces. I've never been able to control it well. It's a pull, a yearning to keep Sendai-san from meeting Maika. I imagine placing many seals around her, confining her within this house, and then I want to erase those thoughts, consumed by emotions like a dark, burning fire.

"What do you want me to do, Miyagi?"

Her question leaves me unsure of how to respond. I don't want Sendai-san to meet Maika, but I also don't want to break my promise to her.

What should I do?

The answer can only be one thing. If I have to choose just one, it would be an answer that makes me dislike myself. Thus, I don't want to say it aloud.

"Let's say we're meeting Utsunomiya on Christmas Eve."

Though her tone isn't as hard as before, it isn't soft, either. She takes a wrapper, places the filling in it, and quickly creates pleats as she seals it. Although it's wrapped in no time, the wrapper is torn, and the filling is visible.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san calls my name quietly.

"What?"
"Then, spend Christmas with me instead."

"Christmas? The 25th?"
"Yeah."
"…Don’t you have plans with your friends?"
"I won’t make any."
"Not that you don’t have any?"

Whether or not she has plans should have two possible answers. But the response "I won’t make any" doesn’t fit.

"I won’t."

She insists with unwavering certainty, suggesting that in her view, it isn’t the wrong answer.

"What should we do, the two of us?"
"Let’s enjoy some cake."

With a gentle voice, she suggests.

"We'll have it on the 24th too, won't we?"
"Then it's fine to have some on the 25th as well."
"Is cake the only plan?"
"If you want to eat cake all day long, that's fine by me."
"What do you mean?"
"Spending the 25th together means we spend the entire day, from morning till night, with each other."
"From morning till night? There's not that much to do."
"There is. For instance, we could go shopping in the morning and make dinner together like today."

I'm not fond of cooking. I don't think it's my forte. As long as I can fill my stomach, instant or ready-made meals are fine.

I've always thought that, but when making gyoza, despite being clumsy and not as skilled as Sendai-san, though it's cumbersome, the idea of cooking together on Christmas isn't so bad.

"What will we make?"
"Whatever you feel like eating, Miyagi."
"There's nothing specific."
"Then think about it. It doesn't have to be cooking if there's something else you want to do. So, give me your 25th."

"…Alright."

Christmas doesn't feel particularly special to me, but I dislike the idea of Sendai-san leaving me to go somewhere else on Christmas. I want all of her time, and if she has plans, I wish I could take her away from whoever she would spend them with.

Whether it's a significant day or not, I don't want to be left behind.

I want to claim the 24th as mine too, but have to let it go. Maika is my friend, and also Sendai-san's. She won't take Sendai-san away from me. So, I soothe myself, urging the dark emotions to subside into the depths of my heart, sealing them away.

"Then, it's a promise."

With that, Sendai-san touches my earring with her lips, vowing our Christmas plans, and then whispers in my ear.

"I'll wait till then for the promise from before too."
"What promise?"

My words of inquiry receive no answer. But I know what that promise is, and yet, I can't help but ask.

"Sendai-san, what promise?"
"I'll answer if you manage to make a pretty gyoza."

As I try to wrap the filling in the skin, her remark results in another misshapen gyoza, prompting Sendai-san's amused laughter.

Chapter 74

Miyagi is Greedy (I)

(Sendai PoV)

Part 221

Miyagi isn't speaking. Despite calling me over to her room, she's silent.

Whenever she's like this, it means something's up. But what exactly, I can't figure out.

“You asked me to come over because there's something you wanted, right?”

I ask Miyagi, who’s sitting next to me, but she doesn't respond.

Her hand remains clasped with the crocodile tissue cover, showing no interest in me. Since coming home today, she's been unusually quiet. Even during dinner, her silence had me worried she might be unwell. She's generally not chatty, but this level of quietness is unnatural.

“Miyagi, if there's nothing, I'll go back and start my prep work.”

I lean away from the bed that was supporting my back. I want to check over what I need to teach Kikyo-chan tomorrow since I have work, but I’m not in a rush. If Miyagi kept me from leaving, talking here in the room before studying wouldn’t be a problem.

“You're always here even if it's for no reason.”

Miyagi grabs my arm. Although her other hand is still holding the crocodile’s, the contact with me is comforting.

“True. But since you went out of your way to ask me over today, I thought there might be something.”

Whether or not there is a reason, I’d prefer her to say so. Without

clarity, I'm unsettled between expecting something good and fearing the opposite.

More likely, it’s not something good.

Miyagi isn’t outright in a bad mood, but her near silence suggests something negative is brewing.

I gaze at Miyagi holding the crocodile's hand beside me. She won’t meet my eyes. The hand that was gripping my arm lets go. She tentatively touches her plumeria earring, brushing the small flower with her fingertips.

Maybe.
Possibly.

I consider the possibilities from her demeanor. I think through countless scenarios, finally arriving at one conclusion.

“…Did you pick out some earrings?”

When I ask, Miyagi's gaze falls to the floor. I can't read what she's thinking as she avoids looking at me.

The hand that stroked the earring grips my arm again, pulling it towards her. The sleeve of my knit sweater is pushed up a bit below the elbow. Miyagi’s hand strokes my arm, pressing gently between my wrist and elbow. Her fingers don’t apply too much pressure, nor are they too light.

Miyagi remains silent.

As her fingers detach, she presses her lips where they had been, sucking firmly. Although Miyagi should be choosing earrings for me, she apparently hasn’t yet.

The increasing marks on my body serve as a reminder of Miyagi, but what I'm longing for right now is something visible to Utsunomiya. If she doesn’t hurry, Christmas will arrive in a little more than a week. To peacefully enjoy Christmas Eve, I want the earrings Miyagi chose.

I lightly tug at Miyagi's hair as she's leaving marks on my arm.
Her lips don’t budge from my skin.

Her suction on my skin is intense.

If she planned to give earrings as a Christmas gift, I might compromise, yet Miyagi, seemingly indifferent to society's festive events, does not typically indulge in such things.

"Miyagi."

When I call softly, she pulls her lips away, revealing the red mark on my arm. The marks left on my body mirror the marks I place on Miyagi. I grip Miyagi's arm, but the expected reciprocation is denied; her arm retreats.

"Let me see your arm."

As I try to grasp her fleeing arm again, adjusting my sleeve, Miyagi's aggravated voice reaches me.

"There are earrings."
"Eh?"
"Just wait."

With that, Miyagi stands up, retrieves a small bag from the closet, and sits beside me.

"I bought earrings for Sendai-san."

It's always the same. Miyagi exists in a realm beyond my comprehension. Though I understand her words, her actions remain perplexing.

"…Miyagi, what is this?"

I show her the mark she put on my arm.

"It's a mark."
"Right. But if you had the earrings, why did you put this mark on?"
"There's no rule saying I can't mark you once I've bought the earrings."
"That's true, but—"
"If you're okay with it, take out the earrings you're wearing now."
"You're not going to show them to me first?"
"I'll put them on you. You can look at them later."

The insistent Miyagi tugs at my ear, urging me to hurry. Apparently, she has no intention of showing me what's inside the bag.

"…Well, that's fine."

Miyagi is stubborn. And I'm weak against such stubbornness.

The answer to this situation is, sooner or later, I'll relent. Persistently asking to see the earrings is pointless. It would be better to just remove them so I can have the new ones inserted quickly. Since Miyagi's offering to adorn me is rare, I should comply. If I miss this chance, she'll simply tell me to put them on myself with cool indifference.

I remove my small treasures and place them on the table.

"Is this okay?"
"Yeah."

Miyagi replies softly, preparing disinfectant and cotton to gently clean my ears. The coldness reminds me of the day my ears were pierced.

Back then, my ears were also wiped down with disinfectant on cotton swabs.

The memory overlaps with today, but today is different. On Miyagi's birthday, I offered her my ears, and as they weren't enough, I ended up giving her all of me. In return, I earned the mark that I belonged to Miyagi.

When the cold cotton leaves my ear, Miyagi's fingers brush over the piercing hole. Her fingers trace the back of my ear, then over the piercing hole again. It tickles, but I don't want to bat her hand away. In fact, I want her to touch me more.

"Miyagi."

I softly call out, and her lips touch my earlobe. She presses her tongue against it with warmth surpassing the disinfectant. Slowly, her tongue slides over it, sensitizing my nerves.

The exhalation that accompanies her actions makes my breath hitch. My body warms from the contact of her tongue. It makes me want

to pull her closer, to have her touch more than just my ear.

Miyagi truly is terrible.

She knows full well how these gestures affect me, yet only gives such superficial touches, never fulfilling more of my desires.

“Could it be, you want to move our promise up?”

When I caress Miyagi’s cheek and ask, she pulls away as if startled.

The promise to wait until Christmas.

I don’t intend to advance it, but Miyagi’s blatant reaction makes it seem like she’s rejecting me.

“If not, stop teasing and put the earrings on.”

It's okay.
Miyagi isn’t rejecting me.
Her exaggerated response to the agreement merely stems from a fear of losing herself to overwhelming feelings. It doesn't mean she doesn't want me to touch her.

Reassured, I look at Miyagi.

“I’m not teasing.”

Taking out the disinfectant-soaked cotton once more, Miyagi carefully wipes my ear. Close to my ear, she whispers, “Close your eyes,” and I obediently comply.

In the darkness, I hear the rustling of something being opened.

A small object touches my right ear. I feel something pass through the piercing hole, accompanied by a soft click. My left ear experiences the same, followed by another click, and then I hear, "You can open your eyes now," so I do.

“Thank you for the earrings. I’d like to see them; can I borrow a mirror?”

I request the room's owner for a necessary item to view the newly adorned earrings, feeling out their shape with my fingertips.

“No.”

“But I want to see the earrings.”

“Look at them when you’re back in your own room.”

Miyagi says curtly, gazing intently at me. Her eyes are fixated on my ears.

If only I could see the earrings reflected in Miyagi’s eyes.

As I ponder whether to return to my room, Miyagi quietly speaks.

“The earrings I just put on you signify that you’re mine, don’t they?”

“Yes, they do.”

“…But it’s not enough.”

Her soft voice reaches me as Miyagi’s lips brush against my neck. She presses firmly, and I push her back.

“I have visible marks, but you're saying that's not enough? What’s bothering you?”

“I… don’t know.”

“How about I stick a sign on my forehead that says I belong to Miyagi?”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Miyagi’s voice drops a little as she softly bites my ear, unlike her usual forceful manner. It tickles, and though I’m tempted by the thought that it might trouble her, it’s preferable to her marking my neck, so I let her have her way.

She doesn’t follow up with her tongue as she did earlier. Instead, her teeth gently graze my earlobe a few times, then her lips briefly touch it before pulling away.

“Have you had enough?”

Miyagi doesn't answer, neither in affirmation nor denial, suggesting she isn't satisfied. Nonetheless, I want to avoid a repeat of the same action.

"Then help me by taking a picture."

Before Miyagi can do anything else, I grab the smartphone from the table.

"Wait, no."

"I'm not taking a picture of you. Just take one of me."

Realizing she won't be photographed, Miyagi calms down and takes the phone. She focuses silently on operating the phone's camera.

Click.

The electronic sound plays, and she hands back the smartphone. I look at the screen to find small, round blue stones attached to my ears.

"What's the name of this stone?"

"You're sneaky, Sendai-san."

Miyagi responds with a hint of displeasure.

"Why sneaky?"

"You only took the picture to see the earrings."

"It's not like that. But more importantly, can you tell me the name of the stone?"

"I don't know."

Her low-tone reply seems unlikely from the buyer, who should know. I search my memories of blue stones I've seen before.

Sapphire, aquamarine, lapis lazuli.

These three come to mind immediately. I closely compare the image on the smartphone screen with my memories. The blue stone in my

ear isn't as pale as aquamarine, and doesn't appear as deep or flecked as lapis lazuli.

It's probably sapphire.

I search for sapphire on the smartphone. But Miyagi interferes, trying to snatch the phone away, preventing me from checking the results.

"Miyagi, knock it off. I can't search if you don't behave."

"You don't need to search. Just put the phone away."

"Then can I take a picture with you?"

"What do you mean 'then'? Absolutely not."

"Just one picture, come on. If I have a photo wearing these earrings, I won't forget that I'm yours."

"I already took one."

"It's important to capture the owner in the photo too."

I lean into Miyagi and snap a photo before she can escape.

Miyagi is Greedy (II)

Part 222

I placed the chopsticks on the black cat and calico cat chopstick holders. As I carried the plate with the sunny-side-up eggs, sausages, and sliced tomatoes to the table, I heard Miyagi's voice.

"Good morning, Sendai-san—"

Her words trailed off, and she added, "Your hair."

"Morning, Miyagi. What about my hair?"
"Sendai-san, what's up with your hair?"
"Nothing really, just tied it into a ponytail."

As soon as she stepped out from her room, Miyagi stared at me without blinking, so I gave her a big smile. Naturally, she didn't smile back, just kept looking intently at me—or rather, at the earrings she'd just put on yesterday.

"Why?"

Miyagi asked seriously, walking over to stand right in front of me.

"Why? Just because I felt like it. Does it suit me?"

Since I had been given permission to show them to anyone, I wanted to do just that. Although nothing would change by showing them, having something I don't need to hide made me happy, and I thought it was fine to wear a ponytail today of all days.

"...It's just that it feels weird because I'm not used to it."

Miyagi muttered and added, "I'll get the breakfast ready." Watching her grab the rice bowls from the cupboard, I gently touched the earrings she had put in yesterday.

Sincerity, truth, love, etcetera.

If you search for the meanings of the stones on the earrings Miyagi

chose, none of them were particularly negative. Yet I couldn't imagine she picked them with such intentions in mind. I stroked the blue stone with my fingertip.

The birthstone for September: Sapphire.

I remembered it clearly because I had researched it when choosing Miyagi's earrings. I never thought they would end up on my ears, but here we are.

Though, whether the stone on these earrings was really a sapphire or not, only Miyagi would know for sure since she bought them. I had researched and compared them online and was fairly certain, but I wanted her to confirm it.

"Sendai-san, breakfast is ready."

Miyagi set the rice bowls on the table, seated herself, and I sat across from her, saying, "Shall we eat?"

"Let's eat."

Our voices harmonized unintentionally. I picked the chopsticks up from the calico cat chopstick holder and ate a tomato. I bit into a sausage, swallowed, and then softly asked, "Miyagi."

"Is the stone on these earrings a sapphire? Was it expensive?"

I asked as if it was nothing, and she responded indifferently.

"Not really."

Miyagi neither confirmed nor denied it.
But if it weren't a sapphire, she would likely say "It's not a sapphire" in an annoyed tone.

"I see. Thank you. I'll treasure it."
"It doesn't mean what you might think it means, Sendai-san."
"Sincerity and truth and such?"
"Yeah."

Her confirmation reassured me that she was referring to the meanings identified by the stone.

"Don't worry, I didn't assume it had that significance."

If Miyagi put any feelings into these earrings, she definitely wouldn't express those feelings aloud. Considering how she brought up the stone's meanings, it seemed obvious the earrings held no such intent. Yet, I couldn't believe the blue stone on my ears was entirely devoid of meaning.

The birthstone for Miyagi's birth month.
Surely, this blue stone is a substitute for her.

There's no reason other than that for choosing her birthstone instead of mine for these earrings.

"For your birthday in September, Miyagi, should I give you something similar?"

At my suggestion, Miyagi, who was cutting the whites of her egg, stopped her hand.

"I don't need it."

Her voice was firm.

"Even though it's your birthstone?"
"It means nothing for me to wear it. It's a mark that shows you're mine. If you don't like it, return it."

Miyagi's words only confirmed my earlier conjecture, and her presence within this cold earring was strong and warm.

"I'll keep wearing it."

Miyagi doesn't shower me with kind words nor does she show soft expressions. The fact that someone like her chose to have her birthstone adorn my ears made me genuinely happy.

"Oh, I forgot to ask. Do the earrings suit me?"

I knew I wouldn't get the answer I hoped for, but I asked nonetheless.

"...Do you think they suit you, Sendai-san?"
"I do."

"Then that's fine."

With that, Miyagi took a bite of her sausage.

Although she didn't say they suited me, she didn't say they didn't either. That was good enough for me, so I took a bite of sausage as well.

We continued to eat silently, finishing our plates and bowls.

"Sendai-san, I'll take care of the dishes."

Miyagi stood and started clearing the dishes.

"Thanks, I'll leave it to you."

I returned to my room and looked at the earrings in the mirror. Miyagi's birthstone sat in the piercings I had gotten on her birthday. My chest warmed, and I let out a soft breath. I stroked the blue stone, prepared for university, and headed to the shared space.

"I'm leaving first. I'll be back late because of work today."

Speaking in front of the adjacent door, I left the house. Walking to the station, I boarded the train, following my usual route toward the university.

I merged with the crowd, walked through the gates, and entered the building. Finding my way into the lecture room, I spotted Mio slightly toward the back and took the seat next to her.

"Good morning."

I greeted her, and she echoed back with a "Good morning." But then, a moment later, she added an "Ah" sound.

"Hazuki, it's unusual to see your hair like that."

Mio seemed surprised as she pointed at my tied-up hair and then continued, "I know. You changed your earrings, didn't you? Did someone give them to you?"

"My roommate gave them to me."
"You're lying! It's from your boyfriend, right?"

Mio grinned mischievously.

"I don’t have a boyfriend."
"You’re saying that, but coming in with your hair up to show off your earrings, it could only be a boyfriend."
"It’s not."

"So you really got them from your roommate? Does this roommate of yours even exist?"

Doubting I had a boyfriend led to doubting Miyagi’s very existence.

Given how I had kept deflecting Mio’s requests to visit my home with vague answers, her reaction was understandable. Had I invited her, Miyagi would have surely objected, so I had to decline. Nevertheless, proving her existence was something I could manage now.

"I have a picture."

I pulled out my phone and looked at Mio.

"You have pictures?"
"Yeah."
"Then show me sooner!"

"There were lots of reasons."

Making an excuse that didn’t quite excuse, I showed her a snapshot of Miyagi and me from the day before.

"This is my roommate."
"Hazuki, what did you do to her?"

Mio said something unexpected.

"What do you mean?"
"She looks grumpy, doesn’t she?"

Well, that was certainly true.

In the photo, Miyagi does not have what you would call a pleasant expression. However, for me, this is the usual face of Miyagi I'm

accustomed to. Her expressions and mood are not necessarily aligned, so she isn't as displeased as the picture seems to suggest.

"I didn't do anything. She just happened to have that look on her face."

Describing the correlation between Miyagi's expressions and her actual mood is challenging. I doubted Mio would believe me even if I tried to explain, so I gave up on persuading her that Miyagi wasn't in a bad mood.

"Happened to? Still, is she really just your roommate?"
"Why are you doubting me? She went to the same high school as me."
"Well, you seem like you were in different groups."

"It's true we were in different groups."
"But were you actually close?"

Mio's voice brimmed with curiosity, signaling that this conversation might become troublesome. The curiosity of people is a nuanced thing, difficult to manage. Steer it the wrong way, and what starts as a gentle breeze might swell into a storm.

What could I say to skillfully divert this topic?

As I pondered this, I casually replied, "Well, kind of," and a voice full of intrigue came from next to me.

"Sounds interesting. You should introduce me sometime."
"Eh?"
"You two seem like you wouldn't connect at all, so I'm curious what she's like. Oh, wouldn't she want to work part-time with us?"

"You mean at your relative's café?"

The conversation was accelerating too fast. It felt like we went from planning a nearby trip to a trip across the globe, and I couldn't keep up.

"Yeah, yeah. A lot of the staff leaves to visit their families during winter break. We're looking for someone to help out. What do you think?"

"My roommate can't do part-time."

Miyagi had told me she didn’t plan to work during the winter break, and likely, she wouldn’t work with me any other time either.

"So then, how about you, Hazuki?"

I would like to work part-time, but there are certain hurdles I must overcome before doing so.

"Can you give me two or three days to decide?"

"No problem," Mio replied lightheartedly, as if her words had no weight at all.

Chapter 75

Sendai-san's Winter Vacation (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 223

I hear sounds coming from the shared space and strain my ears to listen. Even if I wait for a while, Sendai-san, who comes back relatively late after her part-time job, doesn't appear in my room.

I let out a sigh. It's not like I'm waiting for her, but I have to convey a message from Maika.

I feel like it's turned into a troublesome situation.

I wish Christmas would just disappear, but short of the world vanishing, Christmas will never cease to be. Breathing in deeply, I exhale slowly, step out of my room, and knock twice on the door next to mine.

"You can come in," a voice calls from within, prompting me to open the door. Taking a step inside, I see Sendai-san, with the same ponytail she sported in the morning, sitting with her back against the bed.

"Can we talk?" I ask.

"Sure," she replies brightly, and I settle beside her.

"Are you going to wear your hair like that for Christmas?" I lightly tug on Sendai-san's ponytail.

"Is that what you wanted to talk about?"
"Not really. I was just curious if you planned to have a ponytail on the 24th."
"I think I will."
"Don't."

It's not that I dislike ponytails. The earrings I gave her yesterday are

well visible, making me feel like she belongs to me. No one would think of it as a mark of possession, but it seems like a strong bond, and I want to keep seeing it.

But having a ponytail that flaunts her earrings in front of Maika would be troublesome.

"What's wrong with a ponytail?" She asks lightly next to me.

"It's not good. Maika might say something."
"Say something about the earrings?"
"Yes, like where did you get those? Or, did someone give them to you?"

Maika knows I was looking for earrings. Though I haven't said who they're for, if Maika sees Sendai-san wearing different earrings from the school festival, she will surely connect it to me.

If Maika asks why I gave earrings to Sendai-san despite it not being her birthday or Christmas, it would be difficult to answer.

"If she asks, I'll just say Miyagi gave them to me. Isn't it normal for a roommate to give earrings?"
"...I don't want you to say that."

I reach for Sendai-san's ear, touch the blue stone, and press my lips to it.

I wanted a mark that was apparent to everyone, so I pierced Sendai-san's ears on her birthday, giving her earrings as an unfading symbol. Still unsatisfied, I placed many temporary marks on her body, yet it's still not enough, even with the blue stone.

The satisfaction was fleeting, always leaving me feeling like it's not enough soon after.

Surely, if Maika notices Sendai-san's blue stone, I would feel it even more lacking than now, wanting bolder and clearer proof that she is mine.

I pull my lips away from the earring.

Even if Maika asked why I gave Sendai-san the earrings, I can't answer, nor should I. Despite thinking so, there's a part of me that

wants Maika to know Sendai-san belongs to me, making me unsure of what to do.

Hence, the earrings should be kept as inconspicuous as possible.

Though I may have glided the earrings onto Sendai-san's ears to mark her, I can't manage these overwhelming feelings in myself, hoping I won't falter more going forward.

I set my teeth on her earlobe, softly biting down before applying a bit more pressure, prompting Sendai-san to speak quietly.

"I'll think about whether to have a ponytail or not."
"And about the earrings?"

I pull back and ask.

"If you don't want me to say anything, I won't."
"Then, don't say anything."
"Alright."

Sendai-san's hand grazes my earring, delicately caressing the small flower, mimicking what I had done, pressing her lips gently on it. The warmth coursing through my earlobe feels comforting. Her lips part from their sworn promise, touching my cheek. Her fingers trail along the nape of my neck, tickling slightly, and I push Sendai-san's body away gently.

"So, Miyagi, what's this about?"

Her voice returns to normal as if nothing happened, and I let out a tiny breath.

I don't want to convey this. But if I don't, Maika will contact Sendai-san herself, so it can't be helped.

"It's about Christmas... Maika suggested an exchange of gifts with a two thousand yen budget."
"Is that already decided?"
"If you don't like it, I'll relay that."
"It feels Christmas-like, so it's fine."

Sendai-san says in an even tone, staring at me intently. Her expression neither soft nor stern, our eyes meet, and she pokes my

forehead.

"Why do you seem so reluctant, Miyagi?"
"I just don't know what to give."
"Just give something Utsunomiya would like."
"I've decided on Maika's already."
"...You have? What are you giving her?"

In a slightly lower voice, Sendai-san asks, and I respond quietly.

"It doesn't matter much, does it?"
"I'm curious. Tell me."
"An apron. She said she wanted one."
"If you've decided on that, there shouldn't be any issue."
"...I just don't know what to give to Sendai-san."

Even conceding by a hundred, no, more like a thousand steps, gathering for Christmas is fine. But exchanging gifts with Sendai-san, not just Maika, is bewildering. Considering how hard it was to choose earrings, I can't imagine easily deciding on a Christmas gift for Sendai-san.

"Just choose something you like, Miyagi."

Sendai-san says irresponsibly with a smile.

"That's exactly the problem. Tell me what you want."
"Anything chosen by you is fine, Miyagi. Is there anything you want?"
"Not really."
"I see."

Sendai-san breathes a small sigh. Then, she tugs at her own earlobe adorned with the blue stone. However, her hand soon retreats from her ear, dropping to the floor. Her hand catches the platypus tissue cover and inexplicably hands it to me.

"Hey, Miyagi. There's something I want to ask you too."
"What is it?"
"You're not working during the winter break, are you?"
"I said before I wouldn't."
"Right."
"Is that what you wanted to ask?"
"That was just a preliminary question. What I wanted to ask is about

my part-time job."
"...Sendai-san's?"

I tightly clutch the platypus in my hand.

"Yes. I plan to work at that café over the winter break. What do you think, Miyagi?"

As she says this, Sendai-san fixes her gaze steadily on me.

Sendai-san's Winter Vacation (II)

Part 224

How many times have we talked about part-time jobs?

I tighten my grip around the platypus's hand even more. My past experiences discussing part-time jobs haven't led to any good outcomes for me.

What does Miyagi think?

Although she asks me, Sendai-san's answer is already decided. Besides, this story isn't new. I recall her saying, "I'm thinking about doing a short-term job just during winter break." I release the tightly held platypus's hand.

"I've heard it before. You said you'd work during winter break."

"Is it okay if I do?"

I don't dislike Sendai-san seeking permission to work, but since her answer is predetermined, there's no need for her to ask.

"Do as you like."

Trying to change an immutable decision is pointless. The only thing continuing this futile effort yields is dissatisfaction with Sendai-san.

"Do you really think so?"

Sendai-san quietly asks, stroking the platypus's head.

"Whether I do or don't, it doesn't matter."

"It does matter."

"Regardless, just do what you want."

I grasp Sendai-san's hand, which was petting the platypus, and place it on the floor. In her stead, I begin to stroke its head.

“Does that mean I can work?”

Sendai-san probes cautiously.

“I’m not saying it’s okay. But you want to save money in case your job search doesn’t go well and you don't want to return home, right?”

“I’m glad you remember that.”

Sendai-san seems somewhat pleased, but I feel no joy at all.

“I remember. So, it’s fine if you go ahead.”

“Please say it’s okay.”

Hearing her insist that I say something I don’t want to, I take a tissue from the box. Her hand, which should have been on the floor, touches mine and tries to grab it tightly, so I escape from her grip, roll the tissue into a ball, and toss it at her.

“What is it, Sendai-san?”

“What?”

Sendai-san picks up the tissue, which hit her lightly and fell to the floor, and throws it towards the trash can. However, the white ball doesn’t quite make it and drops onto the floor.

“Even if I say no, you won’t listen to me, will you? Since you won’t change your answer, just do what you want.”

To Sendai-san, my opinion isn’t very significant. It’s me who needs to change my perspective.

It’s weird for me to be fixated on whether my roommate gets a job.

Anyone can take up a part-time job. Asakura-san does, and maybe even Maika might. So, if Sendai-san wants to work, she should be able to. Whether she takes on more hours or cuts back, it's entirely her decision. It’s not something I should meddle in.

I understand that fully. Even though I understand, my feelings aren’t

in sync.

If it were Maika saying she'd work, I could let it slide with a simple "Oh, okay." I could cheerfully say, "Go for it." But if the person is Sendai-san, I can't do the same. My head knows, but my mouth speaks differently, and I can't stop it.

"Even if the outcome is decided, I want Miyagi to say it's okay. Since I belong to Miyagi, please give me proper permission."

Without retrieving the mis-thrown tissue from the floor, Sendai-san looks at me.

Her eyes are full of determination, making it clear she won't accept my opinion. The words I truly want to say, pressured by her unyielding gaze, sink into the depths of my heart, transforming into something murky and muddled.

"…When will you start working?"

"After Christmas."

"Until when?"

"I plan to do it until winter break ends."

"If you've already decided, just do what you want."

Since she belongs to me, Sendai-san shouldn't be doing something of her own accord where I'm not present.

I'm aware that thinking this way is purely selfish, and that I'm merely taking advantage of Sendai-san, who accepts most of what I say. Even so, I can't give her the "okay" she desires.

"Miyagi."

Called firmly, I look at the blue stone in Sendai-san's ear.

There's my substitute, so it's okay.

Why can't I think that way? I gave her the earrings as something to stand in for me, yet I can't feel at ease. It irritates me that Sendai-san, who belongs to me, tries to force me to change my opinion.

“…I said I don’t like an empty house.”

Mumbling, I lower my gaze to the platypus. Its fluffy little hand is clutched tightly, and I focus solely on it.

“It’s not like I won’t come home or work all day. I’ll be with you until I leave for work, and I’ll be with you when I get back. We can even sleep together if you want.”

“I never said I wanted to sleep together, and you don’t have to do that.”

What I desire from Sendai-san isn’t that. Not that she stays until she leaves for work or returns, but simply that she doesn’t go and stays here, within my sight, without needing to sleep together.

“Saying we could sleep together was a joke. If there’s nothing else you want, then tell me what would work.”

Hearing her gentle voice, I look at Sendai-san. What I want to say isn’t something I should, so I swallow it down.

“Wear those earrings to your job.”

The stone signifying the month I was born isn’t enough to bind Sendai-san. But since I can’t find any other visible sign to attach to her, I have to be content with the blue stones.

“I already said I'd wear them all the time.”

“And I’ll mark you too.”

In moments like these, Sendai-san will agree to anything I say.

Last time, I exchanged the permission for her to work with “Let me know if you did it yourself.” I got my answer. Today as well, in exchange for saying something I’m reluctant to, I want something in return.

I want her to feel obligated to say “okay,” even if reluctantly, just like I did.

“Fine.”

“I’ll put the mark wherever I want, as many as I want, and you can’t complain.”

“Feel free to mark wherever you want, as much as you want, and if you have any other requests, I'll listen.”

“Don’t go anywhere during winter break except for the job.”

“Fine.”

Her agreement comes too easily, leaving me feeling anticlimactic.

“Sendai-san, are you planning to say okay to whatever I ask?”

“If it’s something I can do.”

“…Even if I say to take off all your clothes and underwear right here?”

I don’t have any particular desire to do anything. I just want to trouble her.

“Is that something Miyagi wants?”

“What if I said it is?”

“…Fine. In that case, take them off me.”

Sendai-san says matter-of-factly, as if it were nothing.

I reach out and touch her cheek. Sliding my fingers down, I caress her neck and slip my hand under her collar to feel her shoulder.

Sendai-san doesn’t move, nor does her expression change. She simply looks straight at me. She’s probably being truthful about her willingness. I could undress her completely this way.

But, I don’t know what awaits after undressing her. I don’t understand myself well. Being with Sendai-san just makes my head a mess with all these unknowns.

“Aren’t you going to undress me, Miyagi?”

Sendai-san's voice brings to mind the promise that asked me to wait until Christmas.

If I undress her now, what will become of that promise?

Conflicted, I withdraw my hand from her.

"…It's okay if you want to work."

Not knowing what I want results in me uttering words I don't want to say. It's maddening. I glare at Sendai-san in frustration, conveying my irritation.

"Thank you."

"Besides, you don't have to ask me every time about your part-time job. Being forced to say it's okay irritates me. If you want to take on more shifts, just do it."

"I'll ask every time, so say it's okay each time."

"I don't need to be asked and I won't say it."

I don't want to hear about jobs. I don't want to reply. It's infuriating that she can randomly increase her shifts, but forcing an "okay" out of me every time makes me feel sick.

Hugging the platypus to my chest, I stroke its head.

Even if Sendai-san isn't around, my room has the crocodile tissue cover and a black cat plushie. Though I dislike an empty house, I'm not a child who can't be left home alone.

Drawing a tissue from the platypus again, I form a white ball like earlier. As I do this, Sendai-san gently calls my name, "Miyagi."

"What?"

"If there's a warm day during winter break, let's go to the zoo as promised."

"Why suddenly change the subject?"

"It's fine, right? Since we've settled the job talk, we can discuss the

zoo.”

“We can’t go to the zoo. You’ll be working during winter break, right?”

I throw a white ball in her direction.

“There’ll be days off. Besides, after work, I’d like to have dinner together and watch a movie in my room or Miyagi’s room. If not a movie, then a game is fine too.”

Picking up the balled tissue, Sendai-san uses a gentle voice to appease me. But unwilling to respond, I stay quiet, leading her to take away the platypus.

“Miyagi.”

She softly calls and, without warning, places her lips on my ear.

“Sendai-san, you’re too close.”

I snatch the platypus back and push against her arm.

“I want to be even closer.”

Though I want to push her away, she naturally whispers in my ear and holds my hand. Her lips soon meet my ear, leaving a warm, moist touch on my ear lobe. Clearly, it’s the tip of her tongue tracing my ear until her lips press against my neck.

Wait until Christmas.

The unbidden thought makes my heart thud loudly.

“The promised day isn’t here yet, is it?”

I push against Sendai-san’s shoulder and ask.

“I still haven’t got an answer for that.”

“Forcing me to respond annoys me.”

While I’ve resigned myself to the job decision, I can answer other things when I want. I don’t want Sendai-san dictating when I

respond.

“It's okay. I’m only kissing you for now.”

Without understanding exactly what's okay, her lips brush lightly against mine and quickly withdraw. Her words about only kissing me were true, which is relieving. Yet somewhere inside, I feel unsatisfied, and I grip the platypus’s hand tightly.

Chapter 76

A Day Miyagi Can't Be Alone with Me (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 225

"Sendai-san, you're not keeping your promise."

As we were just five minutes away from reaching Utsunomiya's house, Miyagi halted.

"What promise?"

"You said you wouldn't wear a ponytail."

"I don't remember agreeing to that."

"You promised. I've been telling you since before we left the house, so could you please undo your hair?"

Ever since leaving the house just before evening, Miyagi had been speaking in a low voice, pulling my arm and furrowing her brows.

Her sharp gaze at my ponytail makes it hard to believe it's December 24th. It feels less like we're on our way to a friend's house to enjoy Christmas, and more like we're on a mission to "take care" of the people enjoying Christmas.

Valentine's Day, Halloween, birthdays too.

On days when everyone else is excited, Miyagi never joins in. The calendar inside her must be blank, a quiet procession from January to December. Therefore, Christmas is no different from any other day for her.

"I only said I would consider the ponytail."

I exhale a white breath as I clarify the misunderstanding. It's cold, even if it didn't turn out to be a white Christmas. Perhaps wearing a

skirt was a mistake.

"That's unfair."

Miyagi’s voice lowers to the deepest it’s been today.

"It's okay. Even if I get asked about the earrings, I won't say I got them from you."

While I won't say I'm displeased spending Christmas Eve with Utsunomiya too, I'm not completely satisfied either. The ponytail is meant to fold away the less pleasant side of me into a small mental drawer.

Fulfilling Miyagi's wish is easy enough, but I want the sapphire stones, my emotional anchor, visible to everyone.

"If Maika asks, will you say you bought it yourself?"

"Yes. So, it’s fine."

When lightly tapping the hand clinging to my arm, more creases gather on her brow. It seems I’m not trusted.

"I won’t do anything that would cause you trouble, so cheer up."

I gently touch the plumeria earrings on Miyagi’s ear.

"…It’s not ideal, but I’ll let it slide."

Reluctantly, almost unwilling to say it, Miyagi begins to walk again.

Though I’m tempted to tell Utsunomiya that they were a gift from Miyagi, I hold back, thinking about the consequences. Breaking the promise might lead to Miyagi, like a child, declaring eternal silence, and she might actually do so.

I walk alongside her, not wanting to be left behind. In about five minutes, we reach a slender apartment building, ride the elevator, and get off on the second floor. After pressing the intercom button at the unit door, it opens.

"Welcome. Both of you, come in."

Utsunomiya greets us, and we both respond with, "Excuse us," removing our coats and shoes in the entrance. We step into an air-conditioned room, sitting around the table with Miyagi in the middle.

"Shiori, you're not wearing your usual Sendai outfit today. No skirt."

Utsunomiya exclaims brightly from her seat diagonally across from Miyagi.

As we wait in the cozily warm room, Utsunomiya has styled herself in festive Christmas colors with a knit top and skirt. Her hair, slightly longer than Miyagi's, is set with soft waves, obviously looking forward to today. Consciously, I keep my mood up with a smile.

"Skirts and Sendai outfits have nothing to do with each other. Also, it's cold today, so a skirt is out of the question."

She echoes a line I heard this morning, making me glance at Miyagi in corduroy pants. I wanted her in a skirt, but it can't be helped. I don't want Miyagi, someone sensitive to cold, to catch a cold.

"By the way, Sendai-san. A ponytail suits you. It's a different look."

Utsunomiya's voice draws my gaze from Miyagi.

"It's Christmas, so I thought I'd change it up."

"It suits you. Very cute."

"Thank you."

"Did you change your earrings too? Didn't you say you had sentimental attachment to the previous ones?"

Utsunomiya's gaze lingers on my ears.

Well, it's no surprise she noticed.

I try my best to present a soft expression and speak the line I prepared.

"I did like them, but I wanted something new and ended up buying

these."

"Oh, really? What kind of stone is that?"

"Sapphire. I decided to live more honestly."

Utsunomiya would never guess that wearing sapphire is a sign that I belong to Miyagi. Having a plausible reason should prevent suspicion.

"Honestly?"

"That's the gemstone's meaning."

It’s not a lie. Though sapphire is Miyagi's birthstone for September, honesty also fits its attributed meaning, making it a reasonable explanation for the blue stones on my ears.

"Oh, it carries that kind of meaning."

"I’m trying to be more diligent as a college student."

Though I shouldn't face suspicion, I answer without looking at Miyagi.

"That makes it seem like you weren't diligent before."

"I was diligent. I intend to be even more so. Plus, I like blue."

I didn’t particularly favor blue in the past, but thanks to the earrings, I’ve grown to like it. Since it’s not a lie, it should be acceptable.

“Simple styles suit you, Sendai-san.”

“Thank you.”

“By the way, Shiori, have you bought any earrings? You were looking when we went to the movies the other day, right?”

"Miyagi, were you looking for earrings with Utsunomiya?"

I blurt out involuntarily.

When I glance at Miyagi sitting diagonally from me, she shifts her gaze away, furrowing her brows slightly.

I slowly touch the blue stone on my ear.

It seems Utsunomiya knows nothing about these earrings.

These aren't something I received on the day Miyagi went to the movies nor chosen during that time, as Utsunomiya's words imply. However, knowing Miyagi took her time selecting earrings, it wouldn't be strange if she had subtly discussed them with Utsunomiya without naming the recipient.

Miyagi said she didn't want Utsunomiya to know who gave the earrings, so it shouldn't involve her. Yet the small fact that Utsunomiya knows Miyagi was searching for earrings unsettles me.

The earrings used to bind me should belong solely to Miyagi.

Though I find Utsunomiya pleasant, I belong only to Miyagi.

"I wasn't searching. Just browsing. Let's hurry and prepare. The pizza should arrive soon, right?"

Miyagi's tone adopts a forced cheerfulness.

Perhaps Miyagi was seeking earrings for herself.

--To replace the Plumeria earrings I chose?

Clenching my fist at my own questioning, I think it's unlikely. But it's difficult to disregard. I can't completely dismiss the possibility that Miyagi might want to replace the Plumeria earrings I selected.

"Shiori, you're too impatient."

As Utsunomiya's voice echoes, the intercom chimes right on cue.

"That must be it. Hang on a sec."

Utsunomiya stands up and heads for the entrance. While lightly tracing the blue stone in my ear, I glance at Miyagi.

"Were you thinking of changing your earrings?"

I ask softly, ensuring Utsunomiya at the entrance can't hear.

"I'm not planning to change these. I was just looking at earrings," she replies curtly, easing the tension in my clenched hand.

"Alright."

I tug gently on my earlobe and direct my gaze to the entrance, where Utsunomiya appears with what looks like a pizza. I stand up.

"Need any help?"

Even though questions linger, now's the time for a change of mood.

"Could you grab some juice from the fridge?" Utsunomiya's voice bounces in the not-cramped but not-spacious one-room apartment.

"Okay."

Following instructions, I take out the juice from the refrigerator, and soon, Miyagi joins, helping spread tonight's feast across the table.

"Let's take a picture before we eat!"

I suggest to Miyagi and Utsunomiya, and Utsunomiya enthusiastically agrees, sidling up to Miyagi. Before Miyagi can say something troublesome like "later" or "no," I smile and say, "Miyagi, you're in the middle," reaching for my phone.

Snap.

A picture capturing three smiling faces is saved on my phone. Focusing on preserving today's memories with Miyagi is better than dwelling on earrings.

"Alright, cheers!"

I call out to them, and two glasses of soda clink together with my glass of orange juice, producing a cheerful sound.

"Let's eat."

Utsunomiya chirps, reaching for the pizza. Miyagi and I also take

slices onto our plates, and the three of us harmoniously murmur, "Let's eat."

We eat pizza, nibble on chicken, and take pictures.

As I intermittently capture photos of Miyagi and Utsunomiya with my phone, Miyagi occasionally gives me furtive glares, but I pay them no mind. Utsunomiya is also taking pictures, so Miyagi is unlikely to protest today if I aim my camera at her.

I had wanted to spend Christmas Eve with just Miyagi, but gathering as three isn't so bad. It’s delightful to document a side of Miyagi different from the school festival in my phone.

"When should we do the gift exchange? Before or after the cake?"

When the number of photos grows and the food on the table dwindles away, Utsunomiya recalls and looks at us expectantly.

"Now’s fine, I think. Here, this is for you, Maika."

Miyagi hands over the present she brought to Utsunomiya. A cheerful "thank you" echoes in my ears, and I look down.

What they’re doing is a standard Christmas ritual, something that would feel missing if absent. I’ve participated in many gift exchanges before, and I know they hold no deep meaning, but I’d rather not see Miyagi giving a present to Utsunomiya.

Still, I owe Utsunomiya my gratitude.

Without occasions like this, Miyagi would never have thought to prepare a Christmas gift for me. I exhale softly, gently touching my earrings.

A Day Miyagi Can't Be Alone with Me (II)

Part 226

This act, in itself, holds little significance.

Even without my presence, it would have likely taken place, and might even recur next year or the year after. Therefore, I should put on a mundane smile, capturing the scene of the two exchanging gifts without a hitch.

My gaze drifts toward the exchanged gifts.

One contains an apron, while the contents of the other remain unknown to me. The apron was prepared by Miyagi, as it apparently was something Utsunomiya had desired. Therefore, the unknown gift probably contains something Miyagi herself wished for.

I want to know.
What sort of thing Miyagi desires that I wasn't told about.

She ought to open it quickly.

This thought crosses my mind, yet Miyagi places the moderately sized gift she received on the floor and calls out to me, "Sendai-san."

"This, I'm not sure if you'll like it," she says in a congenial voice, offering me a slender package.

"Thank you."

I accept it with a smile, setting the gift on the floor, and hand over the present I prepared.

"This is from me."
"Thanks."

Her voice is bright, though she doesn't return a smile.

"One for you too, Utsunomiya."
"Thaanks!"

A cheerful voice echoes as she hands me a small present, saying, "I don't know if this is something Sendai-san would like, but..."

"Thank you."
"You're welcome!"
"Shall we all open them together?"
"Sounds good."

Utsunomiya begins carefully unwrapping the present from Miyagi. Glancing over at Miyagi, I see she's also unwrapping the gift from Utsunomiya.

I lower my gaze to the present Utsunomiya handed me. Slowly removing its wrapping, I discover a small bottle containing colorful dried flowers.

"Is this flower nail oil?"
"Yeah. Sendai-san, your nails are pretty, and I thought you might like something like this."
"My current nail oil is almost finished, so I'm pleased. The flowers inside make it cute, don't they?"
"Great."

Utsunomiya's words sound relieved as she acknowledges Miyagi next.

"Thanks for the apron, Shiori. I really wanted something like this."
"Maika, you debated between this and a café apron for a while. Are you really okay with it?"
"Yeah. At home, an apron that covers the chest is more practical."

As she says this, Utsunomiya holds the apron against herself.

It's a simple, cute yet not overly so, type that wouldn't seem out of place as a store uniform. It suits Utsunomiya well, highlighting the fact that Miyagi not only chooses such gifts for her friends but knows Utsunomiya well enough to select something she would wear.

Not that I want an apron, but a dark ink starts to spread slowly and inevitably in my heart. I detest how my heart becomes so narrow when it involves Miyagi.

"Is that what you wanted, Shiori?"

Upon hearing Utsunomiya's voice, I turn my attention to Miyagi.

"I'm happy with it because it’s something I wanted. Thanks, Maika."
"Miyagi, you wanted gloves?"

In my line of sight, Miyagi’s hands are wrapped in mitten-type gloves.

Cute.
Both the gloves and Miyagi are cute.
Fluffy, smiling, just very cute.

I'm glad Utsunomiya's gift of gloves made her happy.

"Because it's cold."
"Right."

I can't help but have mixed feelings toward Utsunomiya, who can elicit such a smile from Miyagi, and though my negative feelings haven't entirely disappeared, seeing Miyagi smile is gratifying.

"Shiori, do they feel warm?"
"Yeah."
"Good. Can I open Sendai-san's gift?"

Utsunomiya asks, sounding eager.

"Of course. Open it together, both of you."
"Together with Shiori?"
"Yes."

As I smile at Miyagi and Utsunomiya, Miyagi removes her gloves. The two of them gently unwrap their presents, raising their voices in unison upon seeing the contents.

"Hand cream?"
"Exactly. You two are close, so I thought matching ones would be nice. The scents are different, though."

What I gave them was a popular hand cream, known for its pleasant scent.
Even though I felt a slight reluctance to give them matching items,

or to have what I give remain at Utsunomiya's home, I opted for the hand cream.

Hand cream, once used, gets depleted, and it’s a practical choice.

Opting for something inoffensive in these situations makes me feel somewhat colorless, but sudden changes aren't easy to achieve.

"In winter, hands tend to become dry, so this is great. Thanks, I’ll start using it tomorrow!"

Utsunomiya’s voice seems genuine, prompting me to respond, "I'm glad you'll make use of it." Then, turning to Miyagi, I notice a slight frown in her expression.

"Did you want something other than hand cream, Miyagi?"

At my inquiry, the crease in her brow smoothes.

"No, it's fine. Matching with Maika is nice, thank you."

Her voice sounds unnaturally soft, leading me to suspect I may have blundered.

I should have given her something different.

Though I regret it, this was the best I could offer at this moment. The softness in her voice nags at me, though probing further doesn’t seem right, so I grasp the slender present Miyagi gave me.

"I'll open Miyagi's gift now."

I have absolutely no idea what it contains.

In the past, something this slender once revealed a pendant, but today, in this setting, such a thing should not appear. Slowly and cautiously, so as not to rip it, I remove the wrapping paper and extract the contents.

"A pencil case?"

Inside the slender present is a simple, elongated pencil case, with a small black cat lounging in the corner. Unzipping it reveals more space for pens than I anticipated, suggesting its utility.

"I looked for a calico cat, but only a black one was available."
"It's okay if it's not a calico. I like black cats; they're cute, and it makes me happy."

I prefer black cats over calicos.
But even if it were not a black cat—be it a dog, a cow, a frog, or anything else—as long as it's from Miyagi, I'd be grateful. Thus, I smile warmly at her.

"Thanks, I'll treasure it."
"Please do."

Her voice returns to a sound more like the usual Miyagi, offering me some comfort.

"Now that the gift exchange is over, shall we bring out the cake?"

Utsunomiya's voice breaks the moment, and Miyagi agrees, "Sure."

"Utsunomiya, the cake is a whole one, isn't it?"
"Yes."
"Then let me handle the cutting."

I rise to follow Utsunomiya. While she prepares the dishes, I warm the knife. Together, we carry the plates, forks, and the cake.
Without lighting candles or singing, I divide the white cake topped with strawberries into three.

"Sendai-san, your cutting skills are impressive... but isn't the size too big? Maybe we should've done six pieces."

Utsunomiya comments earnestly, her eyes on the cake on the plates.

"Maika, you know Sendai-san is kind of carefree; don't worry about it."
"Big or small, it tastes the same, right?"

We toast for a second time and dig our forks into the cake.

"You're heading back home for winter break, right, Utsunomiya?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'm going back the day after tomorrow. Neither of you are

returning home, right?"

"I won't be. I plan to work at that café you went to last time," I replied.

"Lucky you! I wanted to visit that café again," she said with a hint of envy.

"Come back soon and visit with Miyagi."

"I'd love to, but it might be difficult. Are you planning to work, Shiori?"

"No. I'm going to study," Miyagi stated firmly and then took a bite of her cake.

"Studying, Shiori? ...But you'll take some breaks, right? Like going out or something?" Utsunomiya asked, trying to pry out a different answer.

"I've got nowhere to go."

"What about New Year's shrine visits?"

"It's too cold, I don't want to go."

"I'd go to a shrine visit with you, Miyagi," I offered.

As I took a sip of orange juice and glanced toward her, Miyagi replied, "I won't go. I might catch a cold," before taking another bite of her cake.

"You two never seem to agree on anything. Will you stop living together after graduation?" Utsunomiya chuckled at Miyagi's cold demeanor.

"We agreed on four years," Miyagi said, stabbing her fork into a strawberry.

Four years.
Though that agreement is clear, it doesn't sit well with me when stated so matter-of-factly.

I cut a large portion of the cake and bring it to my mouth, chewing

without savoring its smooth cream and soft sponge, only to swallow and casually express a hope.

"For now, that's the plan. But considering the rent, even if we find jobs, it might be good to continue living together. Only if we secure jobs here, though."

"Sendai-san, are you going to keep looking after Shiori even after finding a job?"

"Why would I be the one being taken care of?" Miyagi retorted.

"It doesn't seem like Shiori is the one taking care of you," Utsunomiya teased.

"I cook meals, clean up, and even take out the trash," Miyagi boasted like a child proud of her daily chores, adding a dissatisfied, "I'm not being taken care of."

"Is that true, Sendai-san?" Utsunomiya inquired.

"Well, kind of. But I get the feeling Miyagi would slack off on everything if she lived alone," I replied playfully.

"You're always saying that, Sendai-san," Miyagi grumbled, disgruntled as she plucked a strawberry from my cake. I voiced a protest, and Utsunomiya laughed. Our ordinary, yet lively conversation spurred us on as time merrily passed by. The round cake vanished completely, clean-up followed, and we left Utsunomiya's house in time for the train.

"Take care," she called, waving us off.

"We will. See you next year," we replied, sharing smiles as Miyagi and I walked down the night road.

A few months ago, something similar happened.
The night Miyagi ran away from home and I went to get her at Utsunomiya's, we walked this path together.

As we slowly headed for the station, I glanced up at the sky.
The cold wind brushed against my cheeks, and I exhaled softly.

Ahead, a few stars twinkled against the dark canvas.

That day, when I couldn’t bring myself to look at Miyagi and kept my gaze fixed down, seems more distant than the stars. Today is colder than that day, but Miyagi feels closer than before. Yet, I wish to be even closer to her. I want to be by her side, closer than she allows, close enough to forget the cold.

"Sendai-san," Miyagi mumbled, stopping in her tracks.

"What?" I asked.

"Although I didn’t mention it earlier, use the pencil case at university and your part-time job."

Clearly, she wants me to use the present, still tucked away in my bag, in specific places.

"You mean at the tutoring job?"

"Yes. Make sure to use it."

"I will. I'll take good care of it."

Taking a step towards Miyagi, who remains stationary, I open my bag and pull out what I truly wanted to give her today. I wrap it around her neck.

"I can't have you catching a cold, so take this."

A sax-blue scarf.
Not the same as the blue stones, but still the same blue hue.
It was an item I had refrained from giving Miyagi, in case Utsunomiya also offered her one. Seeing it on her now, I think she looks adorable, and I'm glad I decided to gift it to her.

"Why are you giving me this? You're the one more likely to catch a cold, Sendai-san," Miyagi remarked, her tone blunt as she looked at me.

"Because today is Christmas," I reasoned.

"I already received a present."

"I know, but still, I wanted to give it."

"Why?" She questioned.

"Because you're sensitive to the cold, Miyagi."

Gently, I place my cold hand against her cheek, chilled by the night wind, prompting a voice of complaint about the cold.

"Sendai-san."
Miyagi, sounding irritated, calls my name and gives me a gentle push. Then, hiding her cheeks with the scarf, she takes a step, then another. I walk alongside her, keeping pace.

"...Thanks for this," she murmured, in a small, almost hushed voice that was followed by an even quieter "I'm happy."

"Eh?"

"Never mind if you didn't hear."

"I heard. I heard it clearly."

"Then don't ask again," she said before hitting my arm hard.

Chapter 77

Sendai-san Keeps Saying Unnecessary Things (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 227

I open the front door. As I step inside, I tightly grasp the scarf that I've just received.

It's warm.

I'm relieved I didn't ask Maika for a scarf.

"Miyagi, are you planning to stay at the entrance forever? It's cold."

A voice urges me from behind, as I feel someone poking my back.

"I know."

I take off my shoes. I gingerly remove the scarf, take off my coat, and head to the shared space. When I turn on the light, Sendai-san picks up the air conditioner remote.

"Aren't you going back to your room?"
"Aren't you going back, Miyagi?"
"It's late, I should sleep."

The Christmas party was fun, but I'm exhausted. Besides, the date will soon change.

—It will be the twenty-fifth.

That means it will be the promised day.

"Let's talk a bit. I have something I want to ask you, Miyagi."

Ignoring my mention of sleeping, Sendai-san switches on the air conditioner and hangs her coat on the back of a chair.

"What do you want to ask?"
"Did you consult anyone when you chose my earrings? Did you pick them by yourself, Miyagi?"
"Of course, I didn't consult anyone."

The earrings I gave to Sendai-san serve as a mark to signify she belongs to me, and by choosing them myself and putting them on her, it holds meaning. It's not something to consult others about, and it's not allowable to do so.

No outside opinions are needed for something identifying Sendai-san as mine.

"That's good then."

Sendai-san says quietly, touching my earrings. Her cold fingertips, brought in from outside, press against the earrings and softly caress my earlobe.

"Did you consult anyone when choosing my earrings, Sendai-san?"
"I picked them myself. I didn't consult anyone."

With a gentle voice, she presses her lips to my ear. It's not unusual for Sendai-san to kiss my earrings. It happens often. But today I tense up. My body stiffens, and I instinctively push against her shoulder.

"Is that all you wanted to talk about, Sendai-san?"

I ask while checking the time. The date hasn't changed yet. Although I'm not consciously trying, I'm quite aware of the time.

"I have more to say. Let me make some tea, then we can talk."

Sendai-san pulls out the chair with her coat on it, smiling warmly.

"We don't need tea. If you have something to say, say it quickly."
"I won't make tea then, but sit down."

Her tone sounds light as if giving me a choice, but in reality, I have no say. She pulls me to sit on the chair covered with her coat.

"If you have something to say, I can hear it standing up."

"No need to rush."

I don’t expect her to remind me of the promise as soon as it's the twenty-fifth, but the time makes me anxious and unable to relax. However, Sendai-san doesn't let go of my arm. I glare at her.

"Fine, I'll sit, let go of my hand."

Upon my firm words, she releases my arm. I put my scarf and coat on the table before sitting down.

"Miyagi, look this way."

Sendai-san is demanding today. Resisting would be more trouble than it’s worth. This conversation might end quicker if I obey, so I turn my chair towards Sendai-san.

"What do you want to do tomorrow?"

Though she made me sit, Sendai-san remains standing, speaking brightly.

"…Go out."

I don’t have anywhere specific in mind, but if I stay home, I’ll definitely be fixated on the promise. Thus, I prefer being out where Sendai-san can't do anything.

"Where to?"
"We can just wander aimlessly."
"If that’s okay with you, then it's fine."
"We'll eat out too."
"Fine. What do you want to eat?"
"Anything. I'll decide tomorrow."
"Understood."

Sendai-san strokes my hair, winding it around her finger then releasing it. As if trying to pass the time, she repeats the action over and over, so I lightly kick her leg.

"Is that enough? I'm tired, I want to sleep."
"Stay up a bit longer."
"I want to sleep."

Wanting to quickly conclude this exchange, I stand, but Sendai-san takes the scarf from the table and wraps it around my neck.

Even though I like the scarf, it's not something to wear inside. As I try to take it off, Sendai-san interferes.

"It looks good. Really cute."

Despite her delighted voice, I don't feel pleased. Unwelcome words don't settle well, so I kick her leg again, but she simply smiles and presses her lips against my cheek, whispering, "Cute."

Once, twice. Unasked-for kisses warm my cheeks. As I push her away, her lips touch my temple, transmitting her warmth to me.

"Sendai-san, what's this? I said I wanted to sleep."

I complain after the fifth kiss to my cheek.

“I couldn't do it earlier.”
“When?”
“When I gave you the scarf.”
"Then, are you satisfied now?"
"Not enough."
"I'm satisfied."
"Just one more time."

Sendai-san smiles and strokes my cheek. Although not much time should have passed since I last checked the clock, it can't be the twenty-fifth yet. While the promised day approaches, it hasn't arrived where the promise must be kept, not yet.

Matching Sendai-san's gaze, I realize I must deal with her standing in my way to return to my room.

I step on Sendai-san's foot. She doesn't move. She won't get out of my way. Perhaps unless I grant her “one more time,” she won't budge. I start to check the clock but stop myself. There's time for a quick kiss.

"Just once, okay?"

After reaffirming the condition, I tug on Sendai-san's clothes. The hand stroking my cheek touches my lips.

Kisses, I thought, are meant for cheeks but it seems not. Being a promise for one time, it’s not worth complaining about, so I obediently close my eyes. Something soft touches my lips.

The gently pressed lips should have immediately separated but they don’t. Slowly and calmly, our body temperatures continue to merge. But this gentle kiss doesn't continue.

Something warm and moist moves in, pressing forward. Before I have a chance to think, it's Sendai-san's tongue, predictably exploring deep within me. Unlike when just the outer surface of our bodies touched, it's hot. Instead of mutual exchange, it turns into a one-sided flood of heat, making it difficult to breathe. It becomes painful, forcing me to grip her arm.

A heated mass envelops my tongue, making me forget how to breathe. Soft yet resilient, it feels good, suffocating, hot, almost unbearable, frightening.

As I gasped for air, gripping her arm with my nails, Sendai-san finally withdraws.

"I wasn't told it's this kind of kiss."

I kick Sendai-san’s leg.

"No matter the type, a kiss is a kiss."
"Seriously, you’re annoying."

With unusual actions disturbing my rest, I find it hard to sleep. The room, heated by the air conditioner, feels too warm, so I attempt to remove the scarf, but Sendai-san doesn’t allow it.

"…Are you perhaps waiting for midnight on the twenty-fifth?"

I ask Sendai-san, who won’t let me return to my room.

"What if I said I am?"

An emotionless voice reaches my ears, and I deliberately stomp on Sendai-san's foot.

"Ouch."

"Then move. I'm going to sleep."
"You promised to give me the whole twenty-fifth, right?"
"When it's the twenty-fifth—"

I start to ask but cut myself off.

When it's the twenty-fifth will this happen?

It’s better not to clarify that. If I ask, it would become a new promise, and we would be locking ourselves into a specific time when the promise must be fulfilled.

"Never mind. I'm going to bed."

With the scarf still around my neck, I push Sendai-san aside to stand up forcefully, grabbing my coat from the table.

"If you say you want to start now, we can begin right away."
"Of course, I wouldn’t say that. Even if I said the entire twenty-fifth, I still need sleep."
"True enough. Rest well for tomorrow. Good night."

Returning a goodnight to the steady words of Sendai-san, I open my room door only to be called back with a gentle "Miyagi."

"Merry Christmas."

Sendai-san quietly wishes, smiling.

The twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth are no different. Just like any other day, they’re not special. I’d always thought that, but Sendai-san's words somehow felt special.

Sendai-san Keeps Saying Unnecessary Things (II)

Part 228

After enjoying breakfast with Sendai-san, I return to my room. I pull out a skirt and hesitate.

December 25th. Christmas. The promised day.

These words all describe today, but none of them necessarily mean I have to wear a skirt.

I put the skirt away and take out my denim pants. The weather forecast said today's temperature won't be different from yesterday's. It's expected to be cold, so I should dress warmly.

I change into clothes similar to what I usually wear and apply the lip balm Sendai-san gave me. As I pick up the hand cream sitting on the table and unscrew the cap, a pleasant scent reaches my nose. I think it's a fragrance I like. But after a moment's hesitation, I close the cap without using it.

I put on my coat, wrap the scarf Sendai-san gave me, and grab the gloves I received from Maika before heading to the shared space. Since Sendai-san isn't ready yet, I don't see her, so I knock on her room door.

After two knocks and calling out, "Sendai-san," I hear a response from inside, "Wait ten more minutes." So, I return to my room, pet the head of the black cat, and while I was standing, sitting, and pacing around, ten minutes pass. I head back to the shared space and the door of the adjacent room opens.

Seeing Sendai-san, I feel relieved.

She is wearing a skirt like yesterday, but she's not as dressed up. Her hairstyle is the usual. I prefer the everyday version of Sendai-san over a special occasion version. I don't want to think of today as a special day.

"You're late. Let's go already."

For now, I complain about having been kept waiting for ten minutes.

"There's no need to rush. We don't even have a destination, right?"

Sendai-san smiles and steps closer to me. Her hand reaches out, and reflexively, I take a step back.

"Miyagi, do you still have the lip balm I gave you?"

Lowering her outstretched hand, Sendai-san attentively gazes at my lips.

"I do, but why?"
"I thought it might be running out by now. I'll give you a new one, so let me know before it does."
"I'll just buy one for myself when it runs out."
"I'll give one to you. Shall we buy one today?"
"No, I'll get it myself."
"Then, let me choose one for you."
"Never mind that; let's just go already."

I turn my back on Sendai-san and head towards the entrance, hearing her say "Okay, okay" from behind. We leave the house, board a train, get off at a random station, and stroll aimlessly.

"Miyagi, is there anywhere you want to go?"
"Not really."
"That's fine, but are we just going to wander around all day?"

Though her tone doesn't sound blaming, Sendai-san's voice isn't particularly gentle either, and I exhale a warm breath.

The cold air turns white.

While the scarf and gloves offer some help, the chill still finds its way through. When I look up at the sky, the sun shyly peeks through the clouds. It's not a great time to be wandering around town.

"…What do you usually do with your friends on a day like this,

Sendai-san?"

I ask as I somewhat move my feet forward.

"Well, let me think. Shopping or karaoke, stuff like that. …Do you want to go to karaoke?"
"No, thanks."

It’s not that I dislike karaoke, and I do want to hear Sendai-san sing, but I don’t feel like going to a place where it'll be just the two of us today. If we were to go, I’d prefer somewhere with more people.

Is there even such a place?

I walk slowly and aimlessly while pondering. When I see the word "book" on the other side of the street, I call out to Sendai-san.

"Can we go to that bookstore?"

When I point across the street, she replies, "Sure." With our destination set, we quicken our pace. We escape the breeze that chills our cheeks and enter the building, stepping inside the bookstore.
Though I have no intention of buying a book, it's warm, and we can kill some time.

"I'm going to browse the manga, so you can look at whatever you like, Sendai-san."

I remove my gloves and glance to the side.

"I’ll join you."

Sendai-san says and follows close behind me.

Twenty minutes later, I move from the manga section to the fiction section, check out the new releases, and glance through the historical novels, a genre I don't usually read. Sendai-san stands next to me, looking at the spines of the books.

We browse through the magazine section, then move to the children's books. Sendai-san remains by my side. Even as I head to the juvenile fiction section, she's still next to me.

I lose track of time as Sendai-san tags along like some sort of stalker, making it hard to relax and focus on the books.

"Sendai-san, don't you have any books you want?"

As we head toward the stationery corner, I ask while looking at her.

"Not right now. How about you, Miyagi?"
"I'll buy some manga."

I don't have a specific book I'm after, but I want to kill more time.

"Buying books now will just add to the stuff you carry. You can buy them later when we're about to head back. By the way, it's almost lunchtime. What do you want to do about that?"
"Is it that time already?"
"It might be a bit early, but it gets crowded right at noon."
"So, is a family restaurant okay?"
"If you want a good hamburg steak, I know a great place."
"What's with the hamburg steak? I never said I wanted one."

The conversation doesn't quite connect. I haven't mentioned anything about hamburg steaks, nor do I recall saying it before we left home.

"You said the hamburg steak I made last time was good, so I thought you might want one. And since it's Christmas, doesn't it feel more special?"
"I'm fine with something ordinary. A family restaurant is fine."

I firmly insist, and though Sendai-san looks slightly displeased, I don't need anything extravagant. We exit the bookstore and head for a family restaurant. Within about five minutes, we spot one and enter. We order pasta from the usual menu choices.

Since there's nothing in particular to talk about, once we finish eating, we end up in an awkward silence. We put our coats back on, leave the restaurant, and put on gloves and scarves. As we wander aimlessly through the streets, the cold begins to seep in, so we enter a station building filled with commercial facilities.

While browsing some miscellaneous items, Sendai-san expresses a desire to look at clothes, and I follow her. When we reach her chosen store and start looking at clothes, she begins insisting on

trying this or that, causing me to flee to another store. But soon, she takes me to a store that suits her tastes and more noisily than the store clerks, encourages me to try on outfits.

After trying on a few items, we eat pancakes and I get dragged into looking at lip balms—per Sendai-san's plan. Before purchasing anything, we leave the shop and dive into a store lined with character merchandise.

With time conveniently passing, we grab some dinner, and as we wander through the station building, Sendai-san stops.

"Can I try this?"

Pointing to a crane game set up along the corridor, stuffed with plushies of sea creatures like sharks and dolphins, she looks at it intently.

"Go ahead. Are you into plushies, Sendai-san?"
"Not really."

Even as she says this, she seems quite serious, staring intently at the plushies. She tilts her head and furrows her brows. Mumbling "Hmm," she steps closer to the glass only to step back, and then approaches again.

Thunk.

Sendai-san's forehead hits the glass with a loud thud.

"Are you okay?"
"I'm fine."

Sendai-san responded tersely, extracting a 500-yen coin from her wallet and inserting it into the crane game. The arm began moving immediately but stopped at a position far from the plushie she seemed to be aiming for, piercing the head of a buried dolphin and returning empty-handed. It was the same on the second and third tries, with the arm stopping awkwardly each time.

"Sendai-san, I don't think you can win any plushies that way," I commented.

"Be quiet, Miyagi," she replied without taking her eyes off the

plushies, but none of them moved in the end.

"…Aren't you a bit too bad at this?"
"I hardly ever play these games."

It was evident. She was incredibly bad at it, and I thought it was better for her to give up on the crane game altogether. Yet, when I glanced over, she was about to put in another 500 yen, and I had to stop her.

"Sendai-san, you'll need a whole lot of money, and I don't think you'll even get one at this rate."
"That's not true."
"It is. It's absolutely impossible. You're not skilled at this. Do you really want a plushie?"
"It's not that I want one..."
"Or do you not want one?"
"I wouldn't say that."
"Then which one do you want?"
"It's not like there's a specific one..."
"Move aside."

I nudged Sendai-san out of the way, frustrated with her indecisive answers.

From my bag, buried beneath the scarf and gloves from our fitting room adventure, I pulled out my wallet and inserted a 500-yen coin. Targeting the penguin, I maneuvered the arm, snagging the tag with the arm and lifting it. Though the penguin fell mid-return, the goal was to move it, so it was fine if it dropped.

Expecting the crane to snag a stuffed animal in one go is unrealistic.

Catching the plushie directly and lifting it in one shot almost never happens, and even when the tag is hooked, it falls quickly. So, you maneuver it several times to guide it to the chute.

"Here."

For 500 yen, I managed to snag one plushie. Whether this was efficient or not was unclear, but I handed the penguin, which was larger than the black cat plushie, to Sendai-san.

However, she didn't take it. Instead, she pouted.

"Didn't you want it?"
"...I wanted to get one for you, Miyagi," she murmured softly, showing rare displeasure.

"It didn't look like you were going to succeed."
"I might have, you know."
"It's impossible."
"No, it's not."
"Yes, it is. You didn't understand how to win a plushie, did you?"
"Even if I didn't, I could manage… or not."

Sendai-san, who usually never sulks, now spoke in a sulky tone, letting out a huge sigh. It was such a childish display that I couldn't help but burst out laughing.

"What's so funny here?"

Sendai-san looked at me, surprised.

"I just think this is a rare side of you, Sendai-san. Consider the penguin my thanks for the scarf."

I pushed the plushie into the arms of a wide-eyed Sendai-san.

"I shouldn't be the one getting this, but…thank you."

She took the penguin and patted its head. Sendai-san seemed a bit unsatisfied, but the relief on her face showed she appreciated the plushie.

"Don't you want one, Miyagi?"
"If it's plushies, I already have one."

There's a black cat in my room. I don't have a hobby of lining up many plushies, so I don't plan to gather more. We leave the crane game behind and continue to wander aimlessly.

"Miyagi, do you want to buy those books today?"

It seemed she remembered my earlier mention of purchasing manga.

"It doesn't have to be today."
"Then let's head back."

Sendai-san stops as she walks beside me. I hadn't planned on stopping, but as she held my arm, I had no choice but to pause.

"I want to stay here a bit longer."
"…Are you planning not to go back until after midnight?"

Her voice dipped slightly, and I averted my gaze.

While that wasn't necessarily my intention, I couldn't deny that I hoped for that outcome. Sendai-san calls my name, "Miyagi." Though I felt the push for an answer, I couldn't bring myself to speak.

The grip on my arm tightened sharply. As I stumbled and clung to her, she whispered something in my ear.

"Do you really hate having sex with me?"

In a small but clear voice, she voiced the question, causing me to instinctively step away from her.

"This isn't the place to say such things."
"If you think this isn't the place, then let's go home."

Holding onto my arm, Sendai-san starts walking slowly. I have no choice but to follow and walk beside her.

Sendai-san is considerate.

Today, she didn't need to accommodate me. We could have returned much earlier, or not gone out at all, but she didn't make those choices.

Sendai-san is always like that.

She fulfills nearly all of my wishes. It's because she is like this that a deceitful part of me thinks I might not need to keep my promises if I strongly express my refusal.

"Miyagi."
"…What?"
"From here on, your time is mine."

With words that seemed to counter the thoughts in my head,
Sendai-san asserted.

Sendai-san Keeps Saying Unnecessary Things (III)

Part 229

"Is your room okay?"

Just one minute after entering the shared space. Sendai-san says that like it's no big deal, but having just walked back home through the night, I'm not prepared for this kind of discussion.

"...What are you talking about?"

I clutch my freshly removed coat tightly.

"You haven't forgotten our promise, have you?"

Sendai-san's words pierce through my memory.

It would have been nice to forget, but I couldn't. It followed me even today. However, Sendai-san must know I remember the promise and am trying to escape from it.

I think it's rather mean of her to bring it up deliberately.

"You promised I could initiate next time. Should I spell it out more clearly? I want us to keep our promise about having sex."

Sendai-san says in a flat voice, eyes quietly fixed on me as I remain silent. She stays standing right in front of me.

"Why are you putting it like that today?"

I remember it even without her spelling it out. When I touched Sendai-san, she didn't refuse.

That was because I accepted her words, "If I don't refuse, it means I can do the same to Miyagi." That turned into a promise we both understood in the present.

"Just because. Besides, in high school, we talked about sex quite normally."

There was never an intention for me to be in that kind of relationship with Sendai-san.

In high school, we openly talked about it like that, and Sendai-san had said similar things. Back then, such words were spoken with the same ease as taking a little detour, and it was normal enough to make rules about not having sex.

"It's different now than back then."

"How is it different?"

Back then, the word wasn't something I hesitated to toss into conversations, but now it feels incredibly raw and burdensome to even consider speaking. Those three letters have gained weight and moisture compared to before, and saying them carelessly seems like the meaning might crush me slowly.

"That is..."

I can't say it. If I let out what's in my head, it might seem like I'm acknowledging this as something special.

"Should I change the question? Why are you so against it?"

"I'm not against it."

But, but, but.

Today's a day that marks the calendar. By this time next year, the city will again be dyed in green and red, just as everyone else gets excited, and I'll remember today.

To fulfill the promise on a day like this makes me feel like it highlights and frames an act that's not happening for the first time as something special. It feels like dressing up the day so it won't be forgotten, which I'm reluctant about.

I wish it were just a day lost among the calendar numbers, one that would be hard to recall, but it's too late to change the day now. Changing it would only make it memorable as the day it was

changed.

"Then, what's the problem?"

"The problem is..."

We've moved from high school to university, and we're not the same as we were back then.

Things change over time, like the seasons, and there's no stopping those changes. The round cake that was always left over is now gone without a trace, and words that could be spoken can no longer be uttered. Favorable and unfavorable changes happen simultaneously, and I fear what my roommate will become.

"If you're worrying about not being roommates anymore, there's nothing to worry about. Whether it's once, twice, or three times, we'll still be roommates. And it's winter break, so it's okay if things get confusing. Do you have any other worries? If you do, just tell me. I'll clear them all away."

Sendai-san's voice floods into my ears all at once, and I can't process it. I understand the meaning of her words, but they slip away before they can settle within me. Her words become fragments, leaving only the fact that I've heard her voice, unable to find words in response.

"Miyagi. What are you worried about? What do you dislike? Tell me everything."

Sendai-san presses on. Her voice isn't very gentle. Her expression seems somewhat stiff, making it hard to breathe. I want her to return to the usual Sendai-san, but the words to restore her to normal aren't within me.

"Miyagi, say something."

Something I need to say. It's something I believe will distance us from our usual selves.

But I have to say it. Past me used future me as a bargaining chip to touch Sendai-san.

So today, I have to keep that promise.

"The promise will be—"

The words from my mouth are quickly interrupted. Such an easy word like 'kept' doesn't come out. My gaze falls to the floor to escape from Sendai-san. I notice a small scratch and rub it with my toe.

"Sorry, I might have said too much. But please, make a decision soon. Otherwise, I might say something to trouble you more. Please, don't make me say unkind things."

Sendai-san's hand touches my hair. She gently strokes it, then lets go. But her hand soon finds my cheek and her fingertips caress my earring.

"...Do you really want to?"

Without looking at her, I ask, and she quickly responds.

"You know without asking."

Ahead, I see Sendai-san's feet approach me. When I look up, she gives me a light kiss on the lips.

"Miyagi, say you'll keep the promise."

Hearing her pained voice, I touch her lips. When I gently stroke them with my index finger, she grabs my wrist, pressing her lips to my palm.

Even though Sendai-san could push through with just the phrase "because it's a promise," she doesn't. She waits for my reply, even though she doesn't need to. She waits for me to agree, patiently, like a well-mannered dog trained to wait for a command. Yet I can't respond.

"Miyagi, please."

My wrist is released as she urges again, touching her lips to mine.

She presses a kiss to my forehead. Then to my cheek. And to my lips.

Over and over again, I'm showered with kisses.

And in between those kisses, she calls my name softly, "Miyagi". But a slight hardness remains in her voice, revealing her strain.

"...If you won't make it awkward, I'll keep the promise."

I push against Sendai-san's shoulder, who has been getting too close.

"Should we take a shower and change the mood?"

"That would make it even weirder."

"Isn't it normal to shower before doing this sort of thing?"

"That's precisely what feels weird."

"Then let's go into your room like usual."

Finally, Sendai-san smiles the way she always does, and I open the door to my room. When I step inside, she follows. She places her coat and bag on the floor and sits on the bed. I turn on the air conditioner, putting away my coat and scarf in the closet.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san lightly taps the bed, indicating for me to sit.

"Why my room?"

I sit down, leaving a space large enough for one person between us.

"I want you to dream of me."

"What kind of dream?"

"The kind where we're together. I'd like you to have dreams like that more often."

As she says this, Sendai-san closes the gap between us. Our shoulders touch, and she holds my hand.

"I don't have dreams like that."

"I remember you saying you dreamt of something weird with me. So

I want you to dream for days about what I'm going to do today—just like I dream. Be like me, Miyagi."

"What do you mean, be like you?"

Without answering, she leans over me, gently pushing me onto the soft bedding. Her lips press against my ear, bestowing a gentle kiss on the earring.

"Hey, Miyagi, remember everything I do to you on this bed from now on. Remember how you feel. Remember everything and dream about it."

She whispers softly, her soothing voice reminding me strongly that this is my room, that the thing beneath me is my bed. It forces me to recognize what's going to happen next.

Sendai-san is intent on making the events on this bed a strong memory, pushing herself into my future dreams.

"Why do I have to dream about it?"

I say, trying to shake off her voice clinging in my head.

"Because I want you to think of me even when you're sleeping. I want to fill you up with me—be more conscious of me."

"Conscious—"

Her lips steal my words before I can finish.

My sweater is hiked up, and a hand finds its way into my blouse. Her palm presses against my side, making my body reflexively jerk. Her soft hand gently caresses my skin, transferring her warmth into me.

I don't dislike Sendai-san's touch. She handles me like something precious. It was the same last time.

But the room is bright, and I'm not comfortable with this intrusion under my clothes.

I grip the roaming hand through my clothes tightly. Her lips leave mine, but all I can manage to say is her name, "Sendai-san," before

I’m kissed again. Her tongue forces open my closed lips, and when I bite on it with some firmness, she pulls away, releasing my blocked lips.

"Sendai-san, wait, please."

I say it strongly, prompting Sendai-san to stand up, retrieve the remote from the table, and return.

"This is what you wanted, right?"

Her voice accompanies the room plunging into darkness as she deposits the remote somewhere.

"Yes, but-"

"Anything else you need?"

"...I don't think so."

"Then, Miyagi, lie down."

"Why are you in such a hurry?"

"Because I think you might run away... and I’m nervous."

Her quiet voice follows as the bed creaks once more, as if in pursuit. Even in the dark, a warm presence approaches and gently strokes my cheek. When I still don't lie down, her hand touches my shoulder, glides down my arm, and grips the hem of my sweater, trying to pull it off.

"I never said you could undress me."

I forcefully pull the blouse that had begun to rise with the sweater back down.

"I want to undress you today."

"No."

"At least take off your sweater."

"No."

"If you want, we can just take everything off."

She starts lifting my sweater and blouse again.

"...Fine, just the sweater."

Reluctantly, I remove my sweater, but she naturally starts to unbutton my blouse, and I stop her hands.

"If I don't, I can't touch you."

"You don't need to touch."

"I already have before, so it should be fine now."

"It's not."

"You were all over me before, so don't say you don't want to now. Just lie down."

"...Let go of me first."

I push against her body, and her hands slowly release from my buttons. She calls my name, "Miyagi," like she's demanding something in return for letting go. Resigned, I lie flat, and she hovers over me. I push against her in response, but then a calm voice reaches me.

"What you did to me that last time, let it happen quietly. I'll make you feel good."

Her words bring back memories of the incident that led to today's promise and remind me of the softness of her body. I take a slow, deep breath.

"So that means the last time felt good for you?"

"...Yes. Your hands felt good."

"Why would you admit that?"

"You asked, Miyagi."

"Do you just answer everything?"

"If I can."

Her unhesitating answer tells me it's true.

Even things others might not answer, Sendai-san does. She claims only if she can, though it feels like there's nothing she wouldn't answer.

Watching her like this, I can trust she doesn't lie to me. Yet, one word comes to mind.

"Pervert."

"Then don't ask perverted questions."

"Just don't answer."

"Miyagi, you'd keep asking until I did. That's why I answered. Last time felt good, and I want you to feel the same way. So, let me unbutton it."

Before I can refuse, Sendai-san starts undoing my blouse buttons—one, two, three—all of them open before I realize how many there were. She slides her hand over my side, and I grab it.

"Let go, Miyagi," she says gently, pressing her hand firmly against my skin. In the darkness, her outline is blurry like spilled ink, and I can't clearly see her expression.

I take a small breath in and out.

Even though I don't want to be touched, I can’t completely reject Sendai-san, who spent most of her day waiting for me.

So, I allow it. That's all.

I squeeze her hand once before slowly letting go.

Her freed hand glides across my stomach, tenderly caressing my skin. My body twitches from the ticklish sensation, but when I move, her hand stops. I grasp her arm as her fingers trace over my ribcage, touching my chest over my underwear, lightly caressing.

Her fingertips follow the strap, and I squeeze her arm tightly, but she doesn't stop. Feeling her hands move as if exploring my undergarments, trying to get between the mattress and my back, my body tenses instinctively.

"Arch your back."

Her voice, a pitch higher than usual, echoes, making me acutely aware of what's about to happen to my body.

"Miyagi."

Called by name once more, I relent, lifting my back slightly as she unhooks my bra.

This isn't the first time. She's touched my chest before. But having experienced it before doesn't mean it's easily permissible.

"No."

I whisper softly.

"It's okay."

The irresponsible words reach me, as Sendai-san gently slips her hands under my bra, softly cradling my chest.

For a moment, I stop breathing.

"So soft."

In a quiet, almost murmured tone, Sendai-san speaks.

"You don't need to say things like that. Just be quiet."

Releasing the arm I was gripping, I push her shoulder firmly. Sendai-san, whispering an apology, gently presses her palm against my chest. I feel her warmth spreading, likely revealing changes in me I wish she'd remain unaware of.

Her hands, which had been lingering inquisitively on my chest, begin to move slowly. Fingertips trace from beneath the collarbone, caressing towards the center, bringing with it a ticklish feeling and

an urge to draw Sendai-san closer.

Her fingertips touch parts I wish she wouldn’t. Those areas, unlike the "soft" description she uttered, should have a different feel now, making my cheeks flush.

I don’t want her to notice changes beyond my control. Yet, Sendai-san's hand doesn't withdraw.

Her motion is gradual and gentle, a soft caress that makes the difference in texture even more apparent. Even though I know it's impossible, I want everything to feel as soft as the rest.

"That's enough, don’t you think?"

I exhale as I speak.

"No, it's not."

"Then stop touching like that."

"Touching... like this?"

She grazes the tip of my breast, so I push her shoulder.

"Please stop."

"Why?"

"This is—"

I almost say it's like we're not roommates, but bite back the words.

Even with things like this, we remain roommates.

So, it's fine. This is an act to fulfill a promise with Sendai-san, and having my body stroked holds no deeper meaning. It might tickle, make my body warm, but it's okay to do this.

I repeat this to myself.

"Miyagi?"

"It's nothing."

I sense my voice might have wavered, but that's not true. It’s the same as always.

Sendai-san's hands move over my chest, her palms exploring, as if to check my texture, and my breathing became irregular.

"Miyagi, I want to kiss here."

She murmurs by my ear, still caressing my chest.

"Absolutely not."

"Then I'll kiss here instead."

Before I can protest, kisses land on my cheek and neck. Her lips repeatedly touch and part from me, nipping at my ear which makes me shiver. Her tongue glides over my ear while her hands continues their movement over my chest.

It’s unfair.

I exhale under the softness of her lips, and tension forms under her touch. My senses scatter, trying to react to where the heat of her body was coming from, creating confusion. The warmth she's generating sends my feelings spinning, making me want to flee from the bed.

"No, stop."

My voice, a rasp barely recognizable as my own, fails to stop her. Sendai-san's fingers circle the center of my chest. Each movement of her hands disturbs my breathing, turning it shallow.

"S-Sendai-san."

I want to block out my faltering voice, yet my hands find her shoulders, gripping strongly, asking her to stop. Still, her hands keep moving, making me shove her harder.

"Enough."

I don't know how long she's been touching me, but it feels too long. I insist with more intensity, and finally, her palms slip from my

chest to trace my ribs, continuing down to caress my side. The way her suction-like hands cling, both assertive and gentle, makes the strength leave my hands. Her hands, wherever they roam, make me let out sounds I don't wish to make, causing me to bite my lip.

"Miyagi, you're so cute. I want to touch you more."

The hand that was on my side now strokes my hip.

"Stop it."

"So cute," she whispers near my ear, her breath tickling my skin.

Despite not wanting to, I become acutely aware of my ears, amplifying even the smallest sounds.

Her breath.
The sound of moist warmth brushing my ear.
The sound of teeth meeting flesh.

Biting lightly, she whispers to me.

"Is it okay to kiss here?"

Her hand, lazily tracing my ribs, glides lower. Sendai-san shifts her position.

"No."

My small voice lacks force, but she seems to hear, pressing a kiss to my cheek. Her hand, which had been stroking under my ribs, glides to my denim pants. Caressing my thigh over the fabric, her fingers trace the waistband and find the button.

Understanding what this entails, I twist my body.

I know what it means to keep the promise. It won't end with just touching my chest.

This is the same as before—her hands proceeding to unbutton and unzip my jeans.

"Sendai-san, stop."

I grab the hand that attempts to advance. Knowing what comes next makes the touch unbearable.

My body is in a far worse state than before; being touched by her will only worsens things. I'm scared to lose myself again and don't want to let Sendai-san notice what's going on with me. If she knew, she would think I had been waiting for this to happen.

"Shiori."

Her gentle voice rings in my ear, loosening the grip I hold on her.

"Don't call me that."

"Shiori."

"Shut up."

"I won't call you like that if you let go."

"Unfair."

"Shiori."

Her voice is one of my favorite things, soothing and pleasant.

I don’t want my name to be called in this voice. It's like it becomes something special, making refusal impossible. My rationality, which I had boxed tightly and locked away to ensure it doesn’t flee gets dragged out, melting away.

"Let me touch you more, Shiori."

Enticed by her soft tone, I release my grip.

Sendai-san unbuttons the button and pulls down the zipper. Her hand reaches in and peels off the underwear that has stuck to my body, and tension climbs up my spine. Though it's not a place to I want to be touched by another person, Sendai-san moves meticulously, as if she's refreshing a memory.

Although it’s not the first time, this act burns my cheeks more than ever before.

I can't breathe. I recall when my fingers touched Sendai-san last time.

What coated my fingers.
What I saw gleaming under the light.

Now, those same substances taint Sendai-san, likely even more than when I touched her.

I want to escape her hands. Yet, from those leisurely moving fingers, I cannot flee.

The sensation is sticky and uncomfortable yet intensely pleasant.

My body wants to go further.

My breathing becomes erratic as her fingertips stroke me, and I can't breathe properly. It's painful, so I press against Sendai-san's shoulders to push her away, but I can't muster any strength. Reluctantly, I tap her shoulder, telling her to let go.

"Shiori, just be still."

"Miya... gi."

I don’t want to speak, but I must correct the wrong name.

"...Miyagi."

Returning to the usual address, I exhale deeply, yet my rhythm remains disturbed and strained.

Her fingers presses firmly against me within my underwear.
The sensations intensify on the touched areas, and my attention was focussed there.

In the darkness, I look at Sendai-san. My eyes, having adjusted to the dark, can just barely make out her face. But I'm unsure if I was reflected in her eyes.

I want to tether her to this room so her eyes do not wander anywhere else.

If I don't lock her away in a treasure box to prevent her from leaving

and not returning, she might flee and start looking at something or someone other than me.

So, I think she should be released before she can escape.

I push Sendai-san firmly. Even when our bodies part slightly, her fingers remain clinging closely, moving smoothly, cutting through my thoughts. I twist away from the sensations she's providing, trying to escape, but Sendai-san doesn't move far.

This isn't right. I need to put more distance between us.

Though I don't want her to leave, pushing her far away would likely make things easier for me.

— Is that true?

Sendai-san's fingers move, melting away the dark ideas in my mind, making it difficult to form a coherent thought.

"Miyagi, wrap your arms around my back."

Sendai-san speaks, her lips touching my ear, tickling it. I expel a small breath and respond with a question.

"Why?"

"Because you're too far. I want to be closer. Let me stay by your side, Miyagi."

"I can't."

"Then hold onto my clothes."

Following her suggestion, I reach around her side and grip her clothing tightly. Her body moves closer, her warmth seeping into me.

Her clothes feel like a hindrance. I should have undressed her. Her warmth feels good. She would've willingly obliged if I had asked.

I let go of her clothes and slip my hand beneath the hem. As my hand slides over her side, Sendai-san shudders slightly.

It's hot. Her body is intensely warm, and I press my hand against her skin. Her warmth transfers into me, heating me from within.

"Call me Hazuki," she whispers.

I shake my head in response, and her persistent fingers move as if urging me, their speed and pressure increasing, making my breath warmer as they caressed and rubbed. Sendai-san’s fingertips and my insides grow hotter as my breathing grows ragged. Our body heat mixed together, overflowing from within me.

A viscous mass of heat envelops her fingers, dirtying both her and myself. Not having the strength to make a sound, I bite my lip.

The urge to draw her closer, whom I had just wanted to push away, intensifies.

"Just once, call me that."

Even though I don't want to talk, Sendai-san tries to make me speak.
She calls me, "Miyagi".
Her voice feels good, making me want to hear more.
She calls again, "Miyagi", prompting me to open my mouth.

"...Ha-zuki."

My exhaled breath mixes with the words, coming out as a raspy sound. It's a voice I wish she hadn't heard. But I want to call her name.

"Miyagi."

It’s whispered near my ear, a slightly higher voice coursing through me, awakening a part of me I didn't know exists within myself.

"Call me Hazuki again."

Sendai-san's breathy voice spills over, warm air tickling my ear.

"Miyagi."

Her voice is close. I want to hear it more. I want her to be closer.

Sendai-san is within reach, I’m touching her skin, and she’s touching

me, yet I desire more of her. She's so close I can't breathe, but the thought of her absence terrifies me. I want to stay like this, to meld and dissolve into each other to the point of inseparability.

"I want to know more about you, Miyagi. Everything, not just here."

A small voice reaches me.

"...What?"

"I want to touch the places in Miyagi that no one else can touch."

Her fingers, which had been moving smoothly, slip from their previous spots, making my body tense.

I understand what's being asked.

An act akin to the deep kisses we sometimes share.
But deeper, more entwined than a kiss.
It’s inviting Sendai-san to a place that even I'm unfamiliar with.

I know such actions exist on the continuum of what we’re doing, but I hadn’t expected she’d desire them.

Not knowing how to respond, I say nothing. The fingers providing relentless, unbearable stimulation stop moving. They’re halted, eager to delve deeper.

Fulfilling Sendai-san’s wish may transform our current relationship significantly, or it might not change it at all.

It’s unclear.

I only feel it might change me profoundly.

"Let's pretend I didn't say that," she says.

Relief flows over my body; the fingers that had paused quietly return to their former positions.

They press against me harder than before, as if to muddle the earlier words through tender caresses.

As if being drawn by Sendai-san’s fingers, my senses sharpen, and

my breathing grows ragged. Though her touch covers so little, it feels like parts of her have merged with me, dissolving seamlessly.

The heat overflowing from me thickens.
It clings, greedily entangling Sendai-san.

Her fingers alternate between firm and gentle strokes, making my breaths short and shallow. I am aware of my body's current state and want to repel her, but at the same time I want to pull her closer.

The sound of my heart thrums loudly.
Its relentless drumming pummels my rationality, shattering it entirely.
Sendai-san's hands continue to unravel me.

I'm having trouble breathing, my consciousness is blurring, and my thinking is dull.
Yet my senses remain sharp enough to feel Sendai-san's touch distinctly. The boundary between us blurs as emotions stretch, expanding under intense sensations.

It's hot, it's painful, all of those things are taken in and swept away and concentrated into one word. Sendai-san's fingers drag those words out of me.

It feels good.

The shared warmth, the rising fervor, her relentlessly moving fingers.

The only emotion that dominates me is that it feels good. It's the same as last time, but it's far greater than last time. Everything about Sendai-san that melts me feels good, and I want more.

I can't think of anything difficult, I just want to call her name.
But I don't want to make a sound.
I don't want anyone to hear the sound of my exhaled breath.
Yet I long to hear Sendai-san's voice.

"Miyagi."

A strained voice reaches me, and I search for the blue stones.
I reach out, tracing Sendai-san's face.
But in the darkness, I can't find the blue stone I put on her.

I can’t locate the sign marking her as mine.

Feeling unsettled, wishing she’d stay, I draw her closer. I slip my hands under her clothing and wrap them around her back, digging my nails into her.

This is mine, and no one else can have it.

I want to call her Hazuki, but not wanting my voice to escape, I bite her neck.

"You can touch harder, Miyagi—I love it when you touch me."

At her urging voice, I press my nails deeper.
I continue to bite her neck as if to claim it.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san calls my name again and again. Breathing heavily, I drown in her voice. Her fingers stroke me harder, pushing me to my limits, and with her guidance, I ascend an unseen staircase.

My breath grows strained, tension coils within my body. Heat pooled inside me threatens to spill over, melting me away.

Racing, climbing, the stairs vanish, and I find myself floating in the air. I dig my nails deeply into Sendai-san’s back as if to anchor myself.

And then.

Afterward.

My body relaxes, and I release my mouth from her neck, withdraw my hands from her back, and try to regain my breath.

"Are you alright?"

Her gentle voice reaches me, but lethargy holds me back from replying. Unable to muster the strength to open my eyes or even move, she showers kisses upon me.

One on my lips, another on my cheek, and more along my neck. Eventually, I bite her lips in protest.

"Take your hand away."

Her hand remains attached to me, and it unsettles me.

"I want more."

"I'm done for today."

"Does that mean there's a next time?"

"That's not what I meant."

"I want to do it again."

Rather than removing her hand, she presses her lips to my earring, whispering my name, "Miyagi," seductively.

"You're too loud."

I exert my heavy arms to push her shoulder. Yet, she doesn't let go. Sendai-san's warmth nudges at my desires, prompting another push to fend her off.

"I want to touch you more, Miyagi, and I want you to touch me too."

"That's not what roommates do."

"We are roommates. So, let me love you more, Miyagi."

"Sendai-san, just be quiet."

I don't want to hear those tempting words. I can't and don't want to think about the future right now. Conversing with Sendai-san makes me want to throw caution to the wind and make new promises.

"Then, just one more kiss, please."

"Move your hand first."

I push against her stomach, and finally, she withdraws her touch. From where I was sinking into the bed, I force myself to sit up and adjust my appearance. In the dim light of the night lamp, I pull out a tissue from the crocodile-shaped box and sit beside Sendai-san to

wipe her sticky fingers.

As I clean one finger after another, removing all of the residue, Sendai-san leans in, calling my name, "Miyagi," before pressing her lips to my neck. Without warning, she sucks hard enough that I feel the sting on my skin.

"You definitely left a mark," I glare at her.

"Miyagi, you're staying home over winter break to study, right?"

"...Yes."

"Then it’s fine. You can cover it with a scarf when you go outside."

With that, Sendai-san presses another kiss at the spot where the mark likely is.

Chapter 78

Miyagi is Missing (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 230

Once before breakfast and once before lunch. I knocked on the door twice each time. I even called her name. But Miyagi didn't come out of her room, nor did she make a sound.

I know why she won't leave her room. It's nothing other than what happened yesterday. The promise fulfilled on Christmas is now keeping Miyagi away from me. It's fortunate she hasn't left the house, but if she won't even leave her room, it's not much different than running away. It's painful to be so blatantly avoided in the same house without even being able to see her face.

I inhale and exhale deeply. I knock on Miyagi's door a bit more forcefully.

Knock, knock.

I listen closely, but there's no sound from inside. My third knock today is also easily ignored.

"Miyagi!"

I call out loudly towards the door, hoping she'll respond, but there's nothing. I want her to open the door before I head off for my first day at the café job.

I pound the door again, harder this time. The room remains silent, and I rest my forehead against the door, rubbing my neck. There's no warmth, only the touch of a turtleneck, which is hiding the bite mark Miyagi left on me yesterday.

"Miyagi, you're in there, right?"

Still, no response, and the door doesn't open. A door that doesn't

open might as well not exist. A door that separates me and Miyagi—it's better to just get rid of it. While I'm at it, smashing down the wall that separates our rooms and throwing it away as bulky trash seems appealing. As I think of these impossible things, I tap the bothersome door and grip the doorknob.

"I'm coming in."

Despite my vigorous words, my hand doesn't move. There's a sense of guilt in entering the room without permission. As much as I want to throw away such a notion of common sense or decency, I'm unable to discard it. I knock again.

"I'm opening it."

After saying I would open it, I finally hear Miyagi's voice for the first time today.

"I didn't say you could come in."

"Then just say it's okay."

"No."

"I'm heading to work soon. At least let me see your face."

I pull my forehead away from the door and call out to her, "Miyagi." But there's no reply this time, and silence envelops the space beyond the door.

"I'm opening it, okay?"

This time, there are no complaints. Probably, this means I can go in, so I gently open the door. Upon stepping into the room, a clump of blankets immediately comes into view, and I call out again.

"Miyagi, show me your face."

"No."

Miyagi, transformed into a large caterpillar on the bed, responds.

"Have you eaten?"

There’s no reply. However, since the food in the refrigerator hadn’t diminished, I know the answer.

"I've made some fried rice and left your portion in the fridge for lunch. You can heat it up and eat."

Approaching Miyagi, still cocooned in her blanket, I sit by the bed and hear a small "Thanks."

“Miyagi.”

When I tug at the edge of the blanket, she pulls back.

"Sendai-san, you're going to be late for your job. Go ahead, or you'll be late."

"I still have time."

I pat the blanket playfully and call her name again, “Miyagi,” but she remains a caterpillar, never transforming back to Miyagi, making me regret what happened yesterday.

Perhaps, using the word "sex" wasn’t right.

I want her to be conscious of me. To be aware of what we are doing together.

The words came from those thoughts, but there was no point in making her conscious if I couldn’t tell her I love her. I didn’t want this Miyagi who wouldn’t come out from under the blanket.

Taking a deep breath, I grasp the blanket. Like nothing happened yesterday, like always, I pull the blanket, calling “Miyagi.”

"Sendai-san, you're noisy."

Miyagi emerges grudgingly, in her sweats, the glint in her eye unmistakably irritable.

"Aren't you going to change?"

No matter how much she’s conscious of me, no matter how much she’s aware of what we're doing, Miyagi won’t say she loves me. Despite all her actions suggesting otherwise, she isn’t someone who

would express such a sentiment. So, we should return to our everyday routine.

"I'm staying in to study, so I'll keep wearing sweats."

Her voice low, she glares at me. Clearly in a bad mood. Though, understandably, there's no reason for it to improve. I manage a small smile, and point to Miyagi's neck.

"You have a mark right here."

The kiss mark I left last night is still visible. When I run my fingers lightly over it, she slaps them away.

"What did you come for?"

"A promise, remember?"

"The promise is already kept."

"There's another promise."

"No, there isn't."

Miyagi states firmly, but I'm not wrong. There are other promises she needs to keep.

"Who said they'd make a mark on me when I go to work? Remember it if you've forgotten."

When I mentioned working at the café during winter break, Miyagi insisted on marking me before I went. She also declared I couldn't go anywhere but work. I'm sticking to that promise and expect Miyagi to as well.

"... It's fine for today. Just go to your job. You'll be late."

With no hint of affection, Miyagi, half-emerged from her blanket, responds.

"You should stick to what you said yourself and make a mark."

"I said today's fine."

"Then let's make a deal. Answer one of my questions and I'll let today's promise slide."

"It's going to be a weird question, isn't it?"

"It's not weird. I just want to know if you had a dream about me."

Though I know she won't answer, I gaze firmly at her. Her lips twitch as if to speak, then close. Miyagi grabs a pillow, and suddenly I'm smacked with it.

"That hurts."

"See, it's a weird question."

"Just asking if you dreamt is a normal conversation. It only sounds weird because you're thinking weird things."

"...Did you dream of me, Sendai-san?"

"Usually I'd say no answering questions with questions, but... I did. I dreamed of yesterday's Miyagi."

I told her to dream of me, yet it was me who dreamt. I'm unbearably foolish, but it's not unexpected.

There was no chance this me wouldn't see yesterday's Miyagi in a dream.

Mixing the reality of the past with fantasies, I crafted a dream I wished would never end. It was so lovely that I want to have that dream again today.

"Did you dream, Miyagi?"

Snatching the pillow from Miyagi, she grabs my arm. My body leans towards her, feeling the warmth of her breath on my ear.

On the bed. With Miyagi right by my side. I recall yesterday.

My body stiffens, as inappropriate thoughts surface. When I call out "Miyagi," she grips the sweater concealing my neck. Her rough hand pulls it down forcefully, and something hard presses against the skin of my neck.

It digs in as if tearing my skin, spreading pain.

Presumably, where Miyagi is digging in her teeth now is the same spot she marked so intensely yesterday, leaving me with a lingering reminder.

Pain. The sensation mirrors and overwrites yesterday, gnawing at me. The searing pain makes yesterday's memory even more vivid.

A body that responded more eagerly than the first time. The voice that called out Hazuki.

These memories flash more clearly than a dream, making me embrace Miyagi tightly, as if to pull her out from the blanket. If possible, I want to skip work and pin Miyagi down on this bed. I want to forget everything, stay here as she wishes, and never leave this house.

I tighten my arms around her back. The sharp pain from her teeth digging into my skin almost takes my breath away, prompting me to whisper her name, "Miyagi", only for her to abruptly shove my shoulder.

"I’ve marked you, so..."

Miyagi mutters, pulling slightly away.

"It’s a problem to have a mark there, though."

I rub the spot where her teeth likely left a mark over my sweater.

"We promised I could mark wherever I want, as many as I want, so it doesn’t matter. Besides, you're wearing that to imply where I should mark, aren’t you?"

"I’m wearing it because I can’t go to work without hiding the marks you left yesterday."

"Then, go to work already."

In a low voice, Miyagi pushes me. When I pull her hand, she bites my neck over the clothing instead. It's better than biting directly, but it still hurts. Still, I don’t want to let her go, so I wrap my arms

around her back, but she pulls away.

"Are you done marking?"

"I’m done."

She answers curtly. Miyagi acts as if yesterday never happened, grumpy once more. No smiles or any sign that she’d ever call me Hazuki, but even like this, she looks adorable to me.

"I’ll be back late today."

I inform Miyagi, who seems more attached to her blanket than to me.

“…What about food?"

"Food?"

"Is Sendai-san's food arranged?"

"I'll have dinner at work."

“What about my dinner?”

"Yours?"

"I don't feel like doing anything today."

Miyagi murmurs, dropping her gaze to the blanket.

“So, you want me to cook?”

“It's fine if you don’t want to.”

“I can cook, but are you sure you'll be okay? You’ll get hungry.”

“If I starve to death, it’ll be your fault, Sendai-san.”

“I got it. I’ll try to be back as soon as I can.”

Though she doesn’t say she’ll wait for me, there's a sense the atmosphere has eased, and I lean in closer. But before our lips meet, she pushes my shoulder away with all her strength.

Miyagi is Missing (II)

Part 231

It was going to be late.

Just like I'd anticipated, my part-time job ended late, and I arrived home well past dinner time. Naturally, Miyagi wasn't in the shared space.

I switched on the lights and the air conditioning, then knocked on her door twice—the same door I'd knocked on before leaving the house—and called out.

"Miyagi, I'm home. I'll make dinner, so just hang tight."

Of course, Miyagi wasn't going to come out. Without waiting for a reply, I returned to my room, set down my coat and bag, and checked the fridge. The fried rice I'd made for lunch was gone, which was a relief. She might not collapse from skipping a meal for one day, but it's better to eat than not.

As expected, the rice cooker hadn't been used. I filled a pot with water, set it to boil, and prepared some pasta. From the fridge, I pulled out vegetables for a salad. Opting for a ready-made sauce, I chopped cabbage and sliced tomatoes, then added salt to the boiling water. Just as I put the pasta into the pot and started the timer, I felt someone watching me.

Turning around, I locked eyes with Miyagi. I had no idea when she had come out of her room.

"It's not ready yet, so you can wait in your room if you want. I'll call you when it's done."

She averted her gaze when I spoke to her as she stood by the door.

"I'll wait here."

"If you're going to wait, you might as well sit down."

I couldn't tell what she was thinking, but Miyagi didn't respond. Still, whether she was standing or sitting, it was comforting to have her in the same space. I turned my back to her and began heating the meat sauce.

After a while, I heard the chair scrape the floor, which confirmed my suspicion—Miyagi was indeed like a stray cat. She'd run away if you got too close, yet whimsically came near sometimes.

I believed there really was no set proper distance between Miyagi and me. Any distance was both right and wrong. Before I left for work, she had been hiding under her futon, but now, here she was, staring at my back so intently it almost hurt. She was capricious, yet a non-whimsical Miyagi wouldn't be Miyagi at all.

I plated the cabbage and tomatoes, then turned around.

"What are you doing, Miyagi?"

"Nothing."

She replied curtly, her gaze dropping to the table.

She really was capricious. As I deliberated over whether or not to say something else to her, the timer rang out, urging me forward. I stopped the persistent beep, strained the pasta, placed it on a plate, and poured the meat sauce over it.

"Thanks for waiting."

I placed the pasta and salad on the table and handed her a fork.

"Thank you. Let's eat."

She spoke flatly and twirled the pasta around her fork. Quietly, she took bite after bite.

Observing the once-motionless mound of blankets now sitting and eating pasta calmly in the chair reminded me of a successful feeding. Miyagi truly resembled a stray cat more than ever.

The only sounds in the otherwise silent shared space were the dry clinks of her fork against the plate, resonating as the pasta I had made in abundance gradually disappeared, soon halved in quantity.

Still, Miyagi wasn't very good at eating pasta, I thought.

She would twirl too much or too little around the fork, alternating between munching on large mouthfuls or nibbling on scant strands with an unsatisfied expression. It was an entertaining sight.

If I told her she was cute like this, she'd likely get angry, and calling her bad at eating pasta would probably rouse the same response. Yet if she would be upset either way, maybe I might as well call her cute. But today, saying such a thing might send her back to her room, so I swallowed the words ready at my throat. There would be other opportunities to call her cute in the future; best to keep quiet for now.

"Is it good?"

I threw a safe question her way, one likely to get a response.

"It's good."

She responded without looking at me.

"What would you have done if I didn't come home? For dinner, I mean."

I posed a question, uncertain if she'd reply. Her hand stopped twirling the pasta.

The clinking ceased, and silence filled the shared space. A brief pause ensued before Miyagi finally looked me in the face.

"You said you'd come back."

Miyagi's voice was sullen.

"I wouldn't want you starving to death. Is the pasta enough?"

"It's enough."

Her hand resumed its movement, bringing the ensnared pasta to her mouth. However, the portion was too large, and she was forced to chew extensively.

"You should visit the café again sometime."

With Miyagi having swallowed, I unexpectedly voiced something I hadn't intended to say.

"It's boring going by myself."

"A friend of mine wants to meet you."

"...A friend?"

Her voice dropped slightly.

"A friend from university who got me the part-time job. We're working together now."

Since seeing a photo of Miyagi, Mio had become inordinately curious about my roommate, pestering me to bring Miyagi to the café long before today.

Bringing the two together seemed like it would lead to complications, so I thought I'd keep quiet. But that wasn't possible. Even during work, I wanted to see Miyagi, and seeing her made it impossible not to suggest she come visit.

"I see."

Her tone was unreadable, revealing neither interest nor disinterest.

"Anytime's fine, so come if you feel like it. Oh, but we're closed on New Year's Day. Want to go to a shrine visit together?"

I asked, feigning nonchalance as I watched the pasta vanish from the plate.

"I told you on Christmas, I'm not going."

Her refusal to visit a shrine was something I remembered well. Although she said it not precisely on Christmas but at Utsunomiya's house on Christmas Eve.

"Come on, let's go."

"What do people do on New Year shrine visits anyway? It's just

cold."

"What? You pray, of course. And you can draw fortune slips if you want."

"Do you have something you want to pray for, Sendai-san?"

Her question brought memories of the various wishes I had made at past shrine visits.

Aspiring to be like my older sister—a childish wish—to tests, entrance exams, and friendships.

I had prayed for many things, but it felt like the most vital prayers went unanswered. Still, had they been granted, perhaps I wouldn't be Miyagi's roommate now, so maybe it was better they remained unfulfilled.

"Don't you have anything?"

"Not really, and I don't have a habit of going for New Year visits."

"Then maybe we should just relax together."

"Why don’t you go, Sendai-san?"

"It's pointless going alone."

I didn't have a particular attachment to shrine visits, so if it didn’t serve as an excuse to go out with Miyagi, there was no need for it. How we spent the first day of January wasn’t important as long as Miyagi was close by.

"Do as you please."

Miyagi replied indifferently, twirling the last of the pasta around her fork.

Miyagi is Missing (III)

Part 232

Which one should I choose?

I look at the nearly used-up bottle of nail oil and the brand-new one that I received from Utsunomiya, both aligned neatly on the table.

Ideally, I'd like to finish the remaining nail oil before opening the new one. Yet, the old nail oil seems tenacious and refuses to run out. After a moment of contemplation, I pick up the bottle gifted by Utsunomiya.

It's been five days since Christmas Eve. I should probably send Utsunomiya my thoughts on using it.

I open the small bottle, which contains colorful dried flowers, and begin applying the oil to the nails on my left hand.

If the me from last year could see me now using a gift from Utsunomiya, she'd be surprised. This has happened because I live with Miyagi; if it weren't for her, the current me wouldn't exist. It's quite moving to think about, though Miyagi hasn't undergone a transformation like I have.

But it's not like she hasn't changed at all.

She seems to be changing, albeit slowly, at a speed different from my own. At times, I'm tempted to grab her hand and pull her along to match my pace, but I understand that rushing things won't lead to sudden change.

I let out a small sigh before massaging the oil into my nails. Next, I apply oil to my right hand and massage it in as well.

Even after what happened during Christmas, Miyagi is still here, and today we cooked and ate dinner together. It's different from when I first touched Miyagi. Despite those events, we've been able to return to our normal lives quite naturally now.

Even if our speeds are different, we're both changing.

"Should I prepare for tomorrow before heading to Miyagi's room?"

Tomorrow, I have my tutoring job. I want to review the material I'll be covering with Kikyo-chan.

I decide to tidy up the nail oil. But before I can grab the bottle, I hear a tapping at the door.

"You can come in."

I respond in a slightly louder voice, and shortly after, Miyagi enters the room.

"I'm bored."

She sits next to me, naturally, and mutters.

"You have exams after the break, right? Aren't you studying?"
"You're also taking exams, Sendai-san. I study while you're away at work."

Since this happens when I'm not around, there's no way to know if it's true or not. However, I find myself not minding if it's a lie, as long as Miyagi is here with me.

"I see."
"Were you doing something?"

Miyagi's voice sounds disinterested as she looks at the two bottles on the table.

"I was applying nail oil. I thought I'd prepare for tomorrow afterward."
"...You mean for your tutoring job?"
"Yeah."
"Can't you take a break from studying around New Year's? It'll be the 30th tomorrow."
"True, but it's for an exam student."
"You said the person you're tutoring is good at studying, right? Is it necessary to go?"

It's not inaccurate. Kikyo-chan, whom Miyagi never calls by her

name, is very capable and probably doesn't need a tutor to enter high school. Yet, both she and her mother have asked me to help her study.

Though I'm unsure if it’s because she likes studying or if she’s simply anxious, when they asked me to come even at the year's end, I had no reason to refuse and felt eager to do what I could.

"Unlike Miyagi, she’s a diligent student."
"Hmm. Then go ahead and prepare for your part-time job. I'll head back to my room."

"I'll prepare, but I have time to talk to Miyagi. I don’t have my café shift tomorrow, so I have time."

If I let Miyagi leave now, I have a feeling she won't return to my room. Even if I go to her room later, she might not let me in.

"...Did you use the nail oil Maika gave you?"
"I did. I plan to share my feedback with Utsunomiya. Did you use the hand cream?"
"I did."

Without hesitation, I touch Miyagi's hand, feeling its texture. As I brush from the back of her hand to her fingertips, she grabs my hand as if displeased. Then she presses firmly on my freshly oiled nails.

"Isn’t that a bit strong for a massage?"

It wasn’t meant as criticism, but she lets go of my fingers.

Miyagi grabs a box of tissues, extracts one, and presses it to my finger, wiping away something invisible from the nail.

As her tissue-covered fingers wipe my nails—one by one—I hold her hand.

"It won’t come off by wiping."

Miyagi is probably trying to remove the nail oil. Her reason seems to be solely because it's from Utsunomiya. My heart begins to race painfully fast.

"It’s not that I want to take it off."
"Then, what do you want?"
"…I’m just annoyed that something that isn’t mine is on what's mine."

Her voice carries a displeasure that resonates in my ears.

These are the words I wanted to hear, and for a moment, my breath catches.

Miyagi, driven by what can only be jealousy, directs these unreasonable feelings at the traces of Utsunomiya on me.

It feels silly, but I’m glad to have Miyagi act this way in front of me. If I can hear such words, it makes me want to use the nail oil from Utsunomiya, which Miyagi doesn’t want, again and again.

If possible, I’d apply it right now just to hear those words once more. But if I did that, Miyagi would likely get upset and leave this room.

So, instead, I press my lips gently against the fingertips of her hand I was holding.

Rather than applying nail oil to my own nails, I glide my tongue over Miyagi's nails and lick her fingers. I press my lips to the knuckle above and lightly sink my teeth in.

"Sendai-san!"

Miyagi calls my name in what sounds like annoyance, but I kiss the tip of her middle finger, taking it into my mouth and nibbling. I press my tongue against the pad of her finger, tasting the blend of the hard bone beneath and the softness of her skin. As Miyagi tries to pull her finger away, I bite down to prevent her escape, only to have my shoulder pushed.

"I never said this was okay."

Hearing her low voice, I release her finger upon her request to "wipe it." I take a tissue from the box, slowly wiping her finger dry, then pull out another to erase my traces, disposing of the tissues afterward.

"Is this alright?"

Miyagi nods with a slight motion.

Though I don't find the act of wiping away my presence from her very amusing, I continue to let my fingers glide over her hand, which isn't quite mine. I caress the nail I had just taken into my mouth and grip her hand tightly, which causes Miyagi to flinch.

Afraid she might pull away, I grasp her wrist. Then, pulling her close, I press my lips to hers.

Before savoring her softness, I slide my tongue into her mouth. Tracing her teeth, I delve deeper, intertwining our tongues, until I'm pushed away forcefully.

Not yet, just a bit more.

Capturing her retreating tongue, I imprint myself on the parts we've shared.

Miyagi's hand grips my shoulder tightly. The mix of pain and the comforting warmth of her touch only intensifies my longing for her. As I wrap my arm around her waist, she bites down hard on my tongue. Instinctively, I pull away, breaking our kiss, and I hear a small breath escape from Miyagi.

It's a sound reminiscent of what I heard on Christmas, making my heart race.

"Can I kiss you again?"

It's not enough. I want more of Miyagi.

"No."

"Then you kiss me."

Even while knowing she probably won't, I still utter the words, only to have a platypus plush pressed against my lips. I place the toy back on the floor and look at Miyagi.

"That's not what I meant."

“Instead of kisses, let’s talk.”

“That's fine too.”

Even though I want more kisses, if she wants to talk, I'm okay with that. But despite asking for a conversation, Miyagi stays silent, just staring at the platypus.

I move the attention-stealing plush to the bed and speak to the uncooperative Miyagi.

“Is it okay if we go to the zoo next year? I have some days off from work.”

“Winter break will be over soon, you know.”

“We can go before it ends.”

“I don’t like cold days.”

“I’ll make a teru teru bozu and wish for a warm day.”

“Aren’t teru teru bozu for wishing for sunny weather?”

“Well, sunny days are usually warm, so wishing for both is the same thing.”

“Sendai-san, you’re really not serious sometimes.”

Miyagi remarks, looking at me with a hint of exasperation.

“It’s fine. What animal do you want to see at the zoo, Miyagi?”

Discussing the effectiveness of teru teru bozu isn’t a pressing issue. If we’re going to talk, I'd rather it be about the zoo.

“…Shoebill.”

“Eh? Shoebill?”

The unfamiliar name prompts me to confirm what I’ve heard.

“Shoebill.”

“What’s that?”

“A bird.”

“A bird?”

I can’t envision what kind of bird it is, whether it’s big or small, so I take out my phone and search for “Shoebill.” What appears is a large bird.

“Miyagi, you have a taste for unusual things.”

The shoebill displayed on my phone has a large head, appearing somewhat unbalanced. Its color is close to gray, lacking vibrancy, and it seems to have something akin to a bedhead. The search results also note that it doesn’t move much.

“It’s not weird.”

Miyagi, who chose an crocodile and a platypus for tissue covers, looks slightly offended.

“Then it’s unique.”

“‘Weird’ and ‘unique’ are the same. Anyway, isn’t there any animal you want to see, Sendai-san?”

“If I can see Miyagi enjoying herself, that’s enough for me.”

But that’s not something I should say out loud, so I utter words appropriate for someone going to the zoo.

“I want to see the shoebill too. Let’s go see it.”

It’s not a lie. I am genuinely interested in the peculiar bird I just looked up. I whisper “Promise,” to Miyagi and then kiss the earring on her ear.

Chapter 79

Sendai-san and the Last Day of the Year (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 233

"Can I call you Shiori? I've always wanted to meet you."

Calling me by my first name within a minute of meeting.
Too fast.
Probably a new record.
I've never been asked by a complete stranger if they can call me by my first name until now.

Suppressing the urge to flee from the moderately crowded café, I glance around for Sendai-san, who should be working here. But I can't find her.

"Oh, am I being too forward? Then how about Shiori-chan? You can call me Mio then."

Before I even get to place an order, the café employee who introduced herself as "Hazuki's friend" has half-revealed her name, but even knowing her first name doesn't make me comfortable with being called Shiori-chan.

From her words about wanting to meet me for a long time, this person must be a friend from Sendai-san's university, the one who introduced Sendai-san to this job. In other words, she's the one who took Sendai-san away from me during the winter break. It seems impossible to get along with her no matter how I think about it.

I let out a small sigh.

I shouldn't have come here alone on New Year's Eve.

I can't help but regret coming to the place where Sendai-san works.

I didn’t come here because I wanted to be bothered by an employee who insists on calling me Shiori-chan and demands that I call her Mio, nor did I want to deal with an employee who neglects her duty to take my order and instead chatters on saying things like “You’re Hazuki’s friend, right?” or “You’re roommates, right?”

"Can I place an order, Mio-san?"

I look at the menu, not at Sendai-san's friend who is smiling at me with a friendly grin. Since she's a café employee, if I just place my order, she should go away. Surely, she won't just linger after taking my order.

"No, no! You have to call me Mio."

A cheerful voice descends upon me, and I shift my gaze to the troublesome employee.

"…Can I ask your last name?"
"Komatsu. Komatsu Mio, so call me Mio."
"Komatsu-san. I'll have the cheesecake with a set of tea, please."

Using her first name creates a familiar atmosphere. It's better to call her by her last name, and I should just force through with the order.

"Aw, you should just call me Mio."

Komatsu-san, whose hair is brighter than Sendai-san's, says in a bright voice.

Honestly, I shouldn't have come.

If I could rewind time, I’d tell myself an hour ago not to leave the house. I swallow the breath that nearly escapes and gaze at Komatsu-san, whose bob cut suits her well.

That she wanted to meet me doesn't matter, and I didn't want to meet her either. I only came to this café because staying home alone was boring, and I thought I might as well go out somewhere once in a while.

But, I realize I was foolish.

Komatsu Mio doesn't seem like a bad person; she looks as bright and

friendly as a clear sky, but I'm not very good with her type.

"Shiori-chan, try saying 'Mio'."

The obstinate employee doesn't seem ready to give up. Moreover, her friendliness surpasses acceptable boundaries.

Why are all Sendai-san's friends like they believe no one could possibly dislike them?

"So, Mio-san, how do you know my name?"

I decide to call her by her first name as she suggested, but I avoid dropping the honorifics. If I address her as simply "Mio" even once, she'll likely start calling me "Shiori," so I dodge the subject.

She's probably familiar with my name because Sendai-san told her, and knows my face because Sendai-san showed her a picture or something, but there's nothing else to talk about.

"Because I heard from Hazuki."

As expected, I resent Sendai-san.
Had she not mentioned Komatsu-san—no, Mio-san—to me, none of this would have happened. Not that I came here because I was curious about her. It has nothing to do with Sendai-san mentioning Mio-san.

"Shiori-chan, do you really not want to call me Mio?"

Mio-san sounds disappointed as she says this.

"We just met."
"I see. For now, you can call me Mio-san. You can drop the honorifics when we become better friends. But let’s drop the formal language, Shiori-chan."

I don't want to say "Understood," and saying it implies using formal language, which she'll probably point out.

So what should I say?

As I struggle for an answer and look around for Sendai-san, a slightly lower voice reaches my ears.

"Hey there, don't bully the customers."
"Oh, senpai."

Following Mio-san's gaze, I see someone and memories flood back from when I came to this café with Maika.

This person was the slightly intimidating customer who was talking with Sendai-san. I'm quite sure she's a regular here and the senpai who introduced Sendai-san to her tutoring job.

Recalling this isn't amusing, and I feel my brow crease. I fiddle with my bangs trying to hide it and take a sip of water served in a cute glass.

"So, Miyagi-chan, are you living with Sendai-chan as a couple?"

She abruptly asks something even Mio-san didn't say.

Why.
It's odd.

I'm not surprised that this senpai knows my name, but I'm shocked by her inaccurate words. What is Sendai-san telling people about our situation?

"Huh? Hazuki told me Shiori-chan is her roommate. Are you living together as a couple?"

"Miyagi-chan, what's the real deal?"

Her unusually gentle voice reaches my ears. But her narrow eyes are scrutinizing me, which is intimidating.

"We're just sharing a place."

My voice ends up smaller than intended, but I clarify the mistaken perception.

"Miyagi-chan, I was hoping for a more interesting answer."

"Even if you say you want an interesting answer…"

"Senpai. Shiori-chan looks troubled. We should ask questions that

are easier to answer. Like, why is she rooming with Hazuki? Or what was Hazuki like in high school? Was she popular then too?"

Mio-san's voice makes my ears perk up, and my heart beats heavily.

In high school too.

Which means that Sendai-san is popular in college as well.
I had a feeling, but now Mio-san's words confirm what was once just my imagination. Suddenly, I start worrying about things I've previously chosen to ignore.

Thoughts arise about who might have confessed to her, what kind of person they were, and how she responded.

Unwanted thoughts bubble up from my heart, making it hard to breathe as if the air has thinned. I lower my gaze to the menu, inhaling and exhaling quietly to chase away the trivial thoughts crowding my mind, though the air still feels thin and I clutch my throat.

Café latte.
Café mocha.
Matcha latte.

I focus on the menu to distract myself, when a dignified voice reaches my ears.

"Mio, the manager is calling for you. Noto-senpai, please return to your seat."

Removing my hand from my throat, I slowly lift my gaze to find Sendai-san standing there with her professional face on.

"Wow, Hazuki, you're scary! Like you've got horns growing," Mio says exaggeratedly.

"They're not," Sendai-san retorts sharply.

"Come on, beautiful staff member, can't you overlook a bit of moving around?"
"No, I can't. Senpai, please return to your seat immediately."
"Alright, fine. I'll head back."

Reluctantly, Noto-senpai returns to her table.

"Shiori-chan, you're having the cheesecake with tea set, right?"

Mio-san, who surprisingly remembered my order, asks, and when I reply with an "Yes," I receive a cheerful "Got it!" in return.

"See you later then!"

I'm not sure what she means by "see you later," but Mio-san says it cheerfully and disappears into the back of the store. Finally, only Sendai-san is left, watching me with a voice lower than usual.

"…Miyagi, who was it that called you Shiori-chan?"

"I don't know. They just decided it. She suddenly wanted to call me Shiori, and it's exhausting."

"So you let her call you Shiori?"
"I didn’t let her, which is why she called me Shiori-chan. Not that I agreed to that either."

"And from now on?"
"From now on what?"
"About being called Shiori."
"I won't let her. Besides, it's just—"

I could say anything to Sendai-san, but it's not right to speak ill of her friends. Understanding that much, I swallow the words on the tip of my tongue and take a gulp of water as well.

"You can continue. It's okay."
"It's nothing important, so it's fine."
"I want to know your impression of Mio and Senpai, so tell me."
"…Their social skills are weird."

Carefully, I try to convey my impression of the two.

"Mio might go a bit overboard, but it's not that strange, right?"
"…I don't think that's normal."

I feel like Sendai-san, who is always surrounded by people and can talk openly with anyone, lives in a different world from me. I doubt we'll see eye-to-eye on this.

"Really? Even if there are differences, it's normal to talk warmly with a friend's friend, isn't it?"
"There are people in the world for whom that's not normal."
"Yeah, I guess you have a point. Oh, Miyagi, what did you order?"

Breaking the pointless discussion tracing parallel lines, Sendai-san changes the topic.

"Cake."
"Okay. Once you finish, wait for me for a bit, will you?"
"Why?"
"I'm finishing earlier today. Let's go home together."
"No, I'll head back alone."

I heard before leaving home that she'd finish early today, but I didn't come to the café to go home together. Besides, if I stay leisurely here, there might be another barrage of questions, and I don't want to linger.

"Come on, it's the last day of the year today, let's go home together."
"If those people come again, it'll be a hassle, so I want to leave first."
"I'll handle that, so don't worry."
"Are you sure?"
"Absolutely. I promise."

Sendai-san's decisive voice reaches me, but there's no such thing as an absolute. Especially with Mio-san, whose concept of personal space seems nonexistent, and Noto-san who feels overly familiar. I feel like they'd easily overcome Sendai-san's promises and start talking to me.

But today is the day the year ends.
I could give Sendai-san a chance.

"…If either of them approaches, I'm leaving immediately."
"I'll definitely prevent that."

With those words, Sendai-san smiles warmly.

Sendai-san and the Last Day of the Year (II)

Part 234

"Sendai-san, you're a liar."

Under the streetlights, I start to voice my complaints to the person beside me.

"I'm sorry."
"Don't just say sorry. Noto-san came, didn't she?"
"I could stop Mio, but it's hard to turn away a customer like senpai. Still, I'm glad you stayed, Miyagi. Thank you."

Her gentle voice reaches me, prompting me to nudge Sendai-san's arm. Since her shift ended, she's been in good spirits. Irritating. This wasn't how things were supposed to go. If either Mio-san or Noto-san showed up, I planned to leave Sendai-san and head home alone—but reality had other ideas.

"I wanted to leave, but I couldn't. Noto-san wouldn't let me. She insisted I stay to keep her company until your shift ended. Even when I said I wasn't waiting for you, she wouldn't stop talking. She talks too much."

Our promise wasn't secured by an earring—so Noto-san approached my seat. Clutching the end of my scarf tightly, I braced myself.

Winter nights come early. The sky is a canvas painted dark, much colder than when I had left home. My breath crystalizes in the air, almost as if it wants to shatter at my feet, causing my shoulders to shiver.

"It's better when they're chatting. If they're silent, I worry they're upset about something."
"That's beside the point."

Noto-san, contrary to her intimidating appearance, was quite relaxed. However, her cheerful questions were difficult to answer,

making the silence more preferable. I hadn't anticipated having a conversation with Sendai-san's senpai at the café. And then there was Mio-san, another unexpected encounter.

While I had considered I might run into Sendai-san's friends at the café, I hadn't imagined they'd be so vibrant and boundary-ignoring. Expecting someone like the top-tier socialite, Ibaraki-san, to approach instead left me misguided.

"Sorry they both were so noisy."
"I'm not going back to that café."

With that muttered declaration, I walked a step ahead of Sendai-san. But leaving her behind wasn't an option. Soon she was back at my side, her soft, kind voice seeping through again.

"Don't say that, come again! I was happy you came today."
"I'm not going back. I only wanted cake today."
"Even so, it made me happy. Come back for more cake."
"You're not even slightly sorry for breaking our promise, are you, Sendai-san?"

Sighing heavily, I exhale. Today wasn't a good day. I learned things I didn't want to know.

I resolve not to know any more about Sendai-san. But there's a part of me that craves even the unwanted truths, forcing me to walk without looking at her beside me.

They say winter blesses us with beautiful stars, but who has time to gaze at them? I'd rather hurry home instead.

"I'm sorry. I regret breaking our promise."

Her serious tone pierces through, and I release my hold on the scarf to give her shoulder a shove. But Sendai-san responds, gently nudging back, bringing us closer.

"Miyagi. ...What did you talk about with Noto-senpai?"

She tugs at my coat, slowing my strides.

"About you, Sendai-san. ...Noto-san suggested that if you wanted money, tutoring pays better than café work, and maybe you should

increase your tutoring gigs."

Relaying what Noto-san said pains me, it pricks at my chest, constricting me.

"...Sendai-san, are you considering more jobs?"
"Well, let's discuss that later."
"I don't want to talk about it."

If she wants more jobs, she can get them. I had told her that when she mentioned working at the café over winter break. She can manage her tutoring jobs as she wishes.

Her work decisions—a rare exception she's unyielding about, and resistant to discussion. I only find myself frustrated that she won't yield to me, even though she's supposed to be mine.

I should've left sooner. Then I could have avoided asking about this. The work Sendai-san takes up is of no concern to me, painfully irrelevant as it may be. I understand that fully, yet I repeatedly bring up the same issues.

"Then, let's talk about something fun instead, Shiori-chan."

Sendai-san's playful tone ventures, tugging at my coat. Her voice is jarringly bright, seeking to steer the conversation elsewhere.

Persisting on the topic of work will benefit neither of us. I peel her hand off my coat, and decide to follow the direction she wants to take.

"That nickname is cringeworthy, stop it."
"Then, Shiori."
"Not that either."

The mention of "Shiori" brings back memories of Christmas night. On that night, Sendai-san whispered "Shiori" repeatedly, scrambling my thoughts, dissolving my reasoning.

It's not that I want to forget it, but I don't actively want to recall it either. If I continuously relive Christmas night, my name becomes inextricably tied to it. And every time Sendai-san calls me Shiori, I am forced to remember what I felt, what I became conscious of, and the longing to touch her—it's unbearable. In an ideal world, I would

bury those memories deep inside.

"I want to call you Shiori."

Her voice, unusually needy, prompts me to push her arm away.

"No. More importantly, thanks to you, Sendai-san, New Year's Eve has become boring. Fix this."

"How is it my fault?"
"It's aboslutely your fault."
"So what would make Miyagi feel happy then?"

I bite back the request I almost blurted out—answer all the questions I'm about to ask.

When Mio-san asked at the party whether Sendai-san was popular in high school, was it the same when she was in university? Has she ever been confessed to?
Noto-san wondered if we were living together as a couple—where did that come from?

Asking such questions would only yield disappointing answers, making it seem as though I'm overly fixated on Sendai-san.

"...I don't know, and I don't need to feel happy."

New Year's Eve is only one day of the year. It isn't special; it never has been particularly enjoyable, so this level of dullness is just right. Better to blend everything into the dark sky, deemed invisible, rather than speaking unnecessarily and sinking into deeper despair.

"It's a holiday, let's enjoy it! We could count down together, something New Year's Eve-like."

Her cheery voice reaches down, as if pulling me from night's depths.

"I don't see what's fun about counting down."
"Hmm, how about staying up until morning to watch the first sunrise of the year?"
"Sounds like I'll get sleepy, so no thanks."
"If you get sleepy, you can just sleep. We could get some snacks at the convenience store and stay up as long as we can. You don't have any plans, do you, Miyagi?"

Assuming so, Sendai-san grabs my arm and quickens our pace. It's a speed that fulfills my desire to get home sooner, but being pulled along wasn't my intention.

It's truly annoying.

While it's true I have nothing else to do, I don’t want her to make decisions for the rest of my day, and I'd like to at least choose the walking pace myself.

"Miyagi, if there's something else you want to do, I’m listening."
"...There isn't."
"Then it’s settled. We'll ring in the New Year in my room."

Sendai-san's cheerful voice resonates through the night sky, and I feel a slight warmth spreading around us.

Sendai-san and the Last Day of the Year (III)

Part 235

To buy a bento or not—that was the question. As soon as we entered the convenience store, I found myself clashing with Sendai-san.

I thought it was a hassle to go home now and cook, whereas Sendai-san insisted that she had already bought the ingredients, and since it was New Year's Eve, we should eat something proper. Our opinions remained at odds until a game of rock-paper-scissors decided in favor of Sendai-san.

"It's a hassle. I think we should just eat whatever and chill," I protested.

In response, she placed two cream puffs into our basket. "It's the last day of the year; let's eat something special," she suggested, trying to make the day meaningful.

"There'll be another December 31st next year," I remarked, tossing two puddings into the basket.

"Miyagi, will you spend today with me again next year?"

"Probably. I have nothing better to do."

"Are you holding a grudge from earlier?"

"Not really."

When I'd told her I wasn't interested in watching the first sunrise, citing potential sleepiness, she had remarked, "You have nothing to do, right?" It bothered me, but it's true. With Maika absent, I have nothing lined up. Still, even if I did have plans, if Sendai-san wants to spend New Year's Eve together next year, I'd be fine with that.

Filling the calendar with plans with her would dispel the boring solitude, and I have no strong reason to refuse.

"Sendai-san, I'll add this too," I said, putting chocolate into the basket.

"Is there anything else you want?"

"Lemon soda. How about you?"

"Potato chips."

We casually threw some ordinary snacks into the basket, paid, and left the convenience store. Chatting intermittently, we headed home and started making a hot pot.

"Miyagi, fetch the earthenware pot," called Sendai-san. As my belly, recently satisfied with cheesecake, growled in agreement, she laughed, and I kicked her leg playfully as I retrieved the pot. She chopped the ingredients, prepared the soup in a small earthenware pot, and added the chicken. Skimming off the scum, bringing the chicken to a boil, she added chopped vegetables, mushrooms, and tofu. We carried our meal to her room.

"Why not eat in the shared space? It's easier to clean up," I asked as she placed chipsticks on cat-themed chopstick rests.

"It's New Year's Eve, so doing something different makes it feel special," she explained.

"Ordinary is fine."

"Ordinary is okay, but doing something different is okay too. Let's eat."

With that, Sendai-san sat against the bed, and I sat across from her. We both reached for our chopsticks, murmuring "Let's eat" in unison.

I took some cabbage and chicken into a small dish with ponzu sauce and pondered.

When was the last time I had a hot pot?

Searching my memories, I couldn't recall.

"Would you have preferred something other than chicken stew?"

Hearing Sendai-san's voice, I looked up. Until living with her, my meals mostly consisted of ready-made, frozen foods, or bentos, so my memories of having hot pot were sparse.

"I've rarely had hot pot, so anything is fine."

I gave a small answer from my recollections, gnawing and chewing the chicken. Eating hot pot alone is dull, so even if the past me were one to cook, I doubt she would've made it.

"I see. Is it delicious?"

When she didn't probe further into my reluctance, I assured her it was delicious, and she smiled at me.

Sendai-san was just as kind as ever. Yet, the unconditional kindness she offered felt hard to reciprocate, leaving me slightly uncomfortable.

I lowered my gaze to the black cat chopstick rest and ate cabbage and chicken. Grabbing watercress and tofu, I glanced at a penguin plush lying on the bed. It was a prize I'd grabbed from a crane game during Christmas, finding its home in varying spots each day.

Sometimes it laid on the floor, other times it sat upon the bed.

Today, it was snuggled in bed instead of Sendai-san, leaving me unsure if it was cherished.

"Sendai-san, you mentioned wanting a penguin plush—do you like that one?" I inquired, recalling her birthday.

She had said she became fond of penguins and lamented not buying the plush herself. Whether she accepted this crane game prize just the same remained unknown to me.

"I like it. I use it as a body pillow," she replied.

"Do you really like penguins that much?"

"Miyagi, don't you like penguins?"

Her return question, asked while she carefully ate hot tofu, led me

to reply, "I wasn't talking about myself. I was asking if you like penguins."

"I do. That's why I sleep with it."

The penguin was neither palm-sized nor large enough to be a proper body pillow. If one wanted a body pillow, bigger would certainly be better.

"Isn't it too small to be a body pillow?"

"Then will you be my body pillow, Miyagi?"

"Definitely not."

I glared at Sendai-san for her absurd suggestion and took some chicken from the hot pot. She did the same and dipped it in ponzu.

As we discussed trivial matters while decreasing the pot's contents, we ate at a slower pace than usual, lingering over the meal. Whether our banal conversation was engaging was uncertain; still, savoring a leisurely pot meal made me grateful we hadn't bought convenience store bentos.

"Miyagi, do you want pudding or a cream puff?" Sendai-san asked cheerfully when only broth remained in the pot.

"Sendai-san, you can decide."

"Which do you prefer?"

"Then, pudding."

In moments like these, she always let me choose my favorite, which, though appreciated, sometimes made her seem as if she was hiding her feelings.

Pudding or cream puff.

It hardly matters which comes first, yet if ordinary conversation is something she desires, she should express her own opinion more often. It may seem like a trivial thing, but it becomes frustrating when she doesn't tell me so many things.

"I'll get them, so wait here," she announced, standing up since she hadn't revealed what she really wanted. She returned quickly with the pudding and a spoon for the table.

"Did you want the pudding, Sendai-san?"

"Yes."

She had placed cream puffs in the basket at the convenience store but now smiled at me while peeling the pudding lid. I abandoned further questions and removed my own lid, sampling the pudding.

It was soft, cool, and delicious.

Taking another spoonful, Sendai-san patted the spot beside her. "Come here."

"Why?"

"It tastes better when you're closer."

"Pudding tastes the same no matter where you eat it."

"Really? Try it; it'll taste better."

Sendai-san smiled as she ate her pudding, leaving me with no explicit reason to comply.

I've never heard of pudding tasting different based on where you eat it, so she's definitely saying something offhand. Surely, she has ulterior motives—like trying some trick or attempting to steal my pudding. So, sitting next to her isn't necessary. However, since today's delicious meal is thanks to Sendai-san, I suppose I can humor her.

"I'll give it a try," I said.

I moved to sit beside her and took a bite of the pudding. Naturally, the taste was unchanged.

"Is it good?" she asked.

"It's good, but the same as before."

"I see. Want a taste of mine?"

As she moved to scoop some of her pudding with a spoon, I pushed her arm gently and declared, "No, thanks."

"But it’s delicious," she muttered under her breath. Since she's eating the same pudding as me, another bite doesn't change anything—no matter how much she eats, it will taste the same.

"Can I take one last photo of you this year?" she asked, setting her pudding down and grabbing her phone.

"Absolutely not."

"Miyagi, you're being stingy."

"Stingy is fine by me."

"Then let me have a bite of your pudding."

"It's the same taste, just eat yours."

"Okay," she conceded quickly, picking up her pudding from the table and continuing to eat, scoop by scoop.

"Hey, Miyagi," she said softly, her eyes dropping to her pudding now two-thirds gone.

"What?"

"Don't let Mio or anyone else call you Shiori."

"I have no intention of letting them."

"If you do, I'll start calling you Shiori too."

She whispered this close to my ear, prompting me to instinctively push her shoulder away.

"Miyagi, that was close. I almost dropped my pudding."

Her voice held a soothing quality. It provoked memories that were best forgotten.

"It's because you suddenly got so close. You're making it hard to eat pudding, so keep your distance."

Feigning nonchalance, I scooped up some pudding and put it in my mouth.

Chapter 80

Miyagi Is Next to Me (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 236

At 11:46 PM, the year is about to end.

On the table, after we had put away the pot and pudding, lay half-eaten potato chips and half-drunk barley tea and soda. Meanwhile, next to me, propped up against the bed, was Miyagi, whose mood was neither good nor bad.

"Sendai-san, have you ever rung the New Year's Eve bell?"

After her indifferent voice, I heard the rustling of potato chips being taken out of the bag.

"No, I haven't. Do you want to go ring the bell?"
"It's cold, so I don't need to go. I just thought that people who visit shrines at New Year's might have rung the bell, so I asked."
"I've only drawn fortunes when I visited."
"I see."

Despite having asked herself, Miyagi's voice lacked interest as she ate a potato chip.

Something's off.

Miyagi quietly ate the hot pot, came to sit next to me, shared the pudding, and is now talking about trivial things.

That's not all.

Today, without any prior notice, she came to my part-time job and escorted me home despite my failure to keep a promise involving Mio and Noto-senpai.

It's truly puzzling.

Miyagi is not the type to do something nice for me just because it's New Year's Eve. Rain or shine, she's the one who would usually give me a gloomy look and then kick or bite me.

I reach out to touch Miyagi's cheek.
Her brow furrows slightly, yet she doesn't pull away.
I trail my fingers over her lips and kiss her as if to confirm the sensation. I touch her earring and then kiss her ear the same way, prompting her to push my shoulder.

"I didn't say you could do that. Let's just welcome the new year quietly."

Although her voice is low when it reverberates through the room, the force with which she pushes my shoulder isn't strong.
Unlike me, Miyagi doesn't seem to regard New Year's Eve as anything special, but she's accepted spending this time in the room with me.

I'm glad about that, so I move closer to Miyagi.
I kiss her again, transferring my warmth to the girl who was called "Shiori-chan" by Mio and "Miyagi-chan" by Noto-senpai.

Both Mio and Noto-senpai are interested in Miyagi, but it's in a different way than I am. They probably don't want to kiss her like I do, or feel the urge to touch her.

I know that well.

They're simply curious about what kind of person my roommate is and want to be friends. But even knowing there are no ulterior motives, I can't easily accept situations where new relationships for Miyagi are emerging. I want to untie the strings Mio and Noto-senpai are trying to connect to Miyagi and tie them to an unfamiliar someone else.

My heart is unsettled.
I'm afraid Miyagi might leave for a place unknown to me.

I find myself having selfish, trivial jealousy, and I want to calm my feelings by doing things that only Miyagi allows me to.

The warmth that transfers from our joined lips is comforting.

But it’s not enough.

I trace the tip of my tongue along Miyagi’s lips.
I want more of her, but her lips remain closed, starting to pull away from mine. I grasp Miyagi's arm, pulling her closer, and silence the words she was about to form with another kiss, pushing my tongue inside. While stroking her side under her blouse and intertwining our tongues, Miyagi bites down hard on my tongue, silencing my complaint, and pushes my shoulder.

"Sendai-san..."

She calls my name in a low voice.

"It's just a little, isn't it? The year's about to end."
"That wasn't a little. Like I said, let's welcome the new year quietly."

Miyagi pulls my hand from inside her clothes and pins it to the floor.

"Then kiss me."
"I already kissed you."
"Not from you, I haven’t received one. If you want me to welcome the new year quietly, then at least kiss me."
"You're infuriating."

With an annoyed expression, Miyagi stands up. Worried she might leave the room, I grab her clothing. However, she merely reaches for the penguin plush lying on the bed and doesn’t leave the room.

"If you want to kiss so much, do it with the penguin."

Miyagi resumes her seat beside me, pressing the penguin into my hands.
I reluctantly accept it but don’t kiss it.

The penguin feels nice, but it's neither warm nor soft like Miyagi’s lips, so it can’t substitute for her. If it’s to be a substitute, it should be only when Miyagi isn’t here.
I hold the penguin, checking the time on my smartphone.

11:57 PM.
The year is almost over.

"Miyagi, watch this."

I display the large clock on my smartphone and show it to Miyagi.

"Why do we have to watch a clock?"
"I want to see the moment the year changes together."

I want a kiss from Miyagi, but while we might debate back and forth, it would be a shame if the year changed. Whether or not I can touch Miyagi's body, a kiss can wait until we've welcomed the new year.

"I'm not doing a countdown."
"That's fine, but let's watch the switch to twelve together."

I put the penguin back on the bed, placing my hand with the phone on Miyagi's thigh. As I look at her face, her brow is furrowed, but she says nothing, letting her gaze drop to the smartphone. We gaze intently at the clock. Time keeps slipping away, less than fifteen seconds remaining to January 1st.

As promised, Miyagi doesn't count down.
In my heart, I count the numbers.
Five, four, three, two, one.

"Happy New Year."

I call out to Miyagi, who replies with a "Happy New Year." I pull the smartphone toward myself and quietly snap a photo of Miyagi.

"I said no taking photos without permission."

Her hand reaches out in protest, and I hide the smartphone from her.

"It's New Year's, it's okay."
"That's not a reason."
"It's just one for commemoration, come on, let's take one together too."

Miyagi, with a frown on her face, shouts things like "No," "It's unfair," and other harsh words, but it doesn't matter. Just as the last day of the year is special, the first day of the year is also special. It's not that anything goes, but taking a photo should be allowed.

"Miyagi."

I tug her arm, bringing her closer.
With an exaggerated sigh, she agrees, "Just one," but I pretend not to hear, taking several pictures of us together. Three, four—during this exchange, several messages arrive. Miyagi's smartphone also rings, announcing incoming messages.

"Wait a minute. I'll respond."

I inform Miyagi, and she says, "Me too," as we both turn our gazes to our phones.
Our screens display words welcoming the new year. The senders include friends from university, Utsunomiya, and others like Umina, to whom I return similar greetings.

"Mio and Noto-senpai send their regards to Miyagi, too."

I received messages, of course, from Mio and Noto-senpai as well. They contained messages not just for me but also addressed to Miyagi.

From Mio, it said, "Please give Shiori-chan my regards, too."

Noto-senpai also sent a "Happy New Year to Miyagi-chan".

I didn't want to call her Shiori-chan and Miyagi-chan, so I conveyed their messages in a broad manner, though Miyagi's expression remained troubled.

"…Tell them I said thanks," she replied in a low, uninterested voice.

I understand her reluctance to engage warmly. Those two are likely the type she isn't comfortable with.

"I'll let them know now."

It's not something that needs immediate attention, but I pass Miyagi's words along to the two. Replies come back quickly, with Mio wanting to talk to Shiori-chan, but I handle that casually.

"Ami also sends a 'Happy New Year' to Sendai-san from this side."

"Tell her we should talk again sometime."

"...Okay."

Miyagi responds quietly and falls into silence.

I don’t mind lively types like Mio and senpai. Silence can make me anxious, wondering what the other person is thinking, so it's reassuring when conversation flows. Though Mio’s meddling can stir up trouble, that level of liveliness feels comforting.

But it’s different with Miyagi.

Even if she's silent or grumpy, having her beside me doesn’t feel burdensome. I may be curious about her thoughts, but I find peace in the quiet we share.

I hold Miyagi’s hand.

"Miyagi, do you want to watch the first sunrise of the year?"

"Are we going somewhere?"

"No."

"Is it still the first sunrise if we watch from home?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think it counts if we see it from here."

"Isn't that a bit loose?"

"Loose is fine. We can look up the time and watch together."

"I don’t need to. I’m going to take a bath and sleep."

Miyagi decisively lets go of my hand and attempts to stand up.

She wasn’t enthusiastic about watching the sunrise from the beginning, but I don’t want her to leave just like that.

"Then after I take a bath, can I come to your room? Let's talk a little more."

"I'm tired and I want to sleep."

"If you’re asleep, I’ll wake you up."

"…Do as you like."

Miyagi’s voice carried a hint of crankiness that did not match the New Year mood.

Miyagi Is Next to Me (II)

Part 237

After getting out of the bath, I dry my hair. I walk to Miyagi's room and knock on the door twice.

"Are you awake?"

There's no response from inside, but soon the door opens, and there stands Miyagi, wearing sweats as pajamas just like me.

"What?"

"Happy New Year."

"I already heard that."

"But it's okay to say it as many times as you want, right?"

"…Happy New Year."

Miyagi reluctantly echoes the greeting and nudges my foot with hers before adding, "What do you want?"

"Didn't we agree to talk a bit more? You can choose either my room or yours."

"I don't have anything left to say."

"If there's nothing to say, we can just be quiet. It's the first day of a new year, and it's fine to do something different, don't you think?"

"Is January 1st really that special? It's just another day off. The convenience stores and family restaurants are open."

Miyagi's tone is sharp as she remarks and nudges my foot once more.

"It's the start of a new year, so it's generally considered a special day. Even if it weren't, it's a holiday, so it's perfectly fine to stay up

late. Anyway, let me into your room."

"Why do I have to let you in, Sendai-san?"

"Then come to my room."

I grin, and Miyagi glares at me. Still, when I tug on her arm, she obligingly follows me to my room without any complaints.

However, she's in a bad mood.

Although she sits next to me, there's not the slightest hint of a smile.

"Sendai-san. I'm sleepy."

Her monotonous voice reaches my ears as I lean against the bed headboard.

"If you're sleepy, just sleep here."

"The bed's occupied by a penguin; there's nowhere for me to sleep. I'll just head back to my room."

"Pen-chan sleeps on the floor tonight, so it's fine."

I pick up the plush penguin lying on the bed and cuddle it. I pat its head gently and look at Miyagi, who strokes the penguin's head and says accusatorily,

"That's cruel."

"I dote on it every day, so I think it'll forgive me for one night."

The penguin is a gift from Miyagi, which I cherish dearly. It wouldn't get angry over something as trivial as sleeping on the floor, and if the floor’s not suitable, it can sleep on the table or the chest.

"If I sleep here, what about you, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi asks, playfully tugging at the penguin's flipper or maybe its wing.

"If you sleep, I'll sleep, too."

"Where?"

"Next to you."

Hearing my response, Miyagi clearly makes a displeased face.

"If we're just sleeping, you don't have to make that face."

"We're 'just sleeping,' but Sendai-san always breaks her promises. You haven't forgotten how you breaking your promise led to Noto-san coming to my seat today, right?"

"That was yesterday."

"I'm not talking about that kind of detail. I'm talking about how I had a horrible time because of Noto-san."

"I know. I'm sorry."

When she brings up what happened yesterday, all I can do is apologize, but it wasn't a pleasant thing for me either. The thought of Miyagi leaving made me feel terrible, and I was tormented by curiosity about what they were talking about.

I don't mind Miyagi talking to anyone, but when I see her with someone else, an undesirable version of me emerges—a jealous me, burdened with dust, who wants to drag her home and ask about everything. That's not a side of me I like.

It's not something to dwell on New Year's Day.

I place the penguin on the floor and take Miyagi's hand. However, she quickly pulls away and stands as if to leave. I grab her sweatshirt, trying to keep her from returning to her room.

"Happy New Year."

"How many times are you going to say that?"

"As many as it takes. It's nice to have 'Happy New Year' returned after saying it."

Last year, the year before that, and the year before that.

I have no memory of my family returning the greeting. Friends would echo it back like a doorbell, but those words held no real meaning.

That's why getting a return Happy New Year from Miyagi makes me happy.

The fact that she would say it, even when she doesn't want to, is enough. I no longer need the words from anyone else.

"…Happy New Year."

Miyagi says it grudgingly, exhaling a small sigh. She pulls away my hand that holds her sweatshirt and whispers, "Sleep now."

"Stay here and sleep."

I want to spend more time with Miyagi, who returns my Happy New Year. I earnestly wish for her to stay here, but she picks up the penguin and stands up.

"Hey, that's mine."

If Miyagi insists on returning to her room, I can't stop her, but I don't want her to take the penguin. It stands in for her, and it needs to stay in my bed if she isn't here.

"That side is Sendai-san's turf."

Miyagi places the penguin on the pillow and points toward the wall.

"…A boundary line?"

"Yes. Don't cross over from the penguin."

Her voice is displeased as she emphasizes, "I'm serious."

"Okay."

"Then come over to this side first."

It seems she's not giving me a choice not to sleep.

I'm not sleepy, but if I say I want to stay up, Miyagi might leave the

room. So, I obediently comply, switching off the air conditioner and getting into bed. I offer Miyagi the pillow, placing the penguin in its original spot, and soon Miyagi comes over, switching off the lights.

"Are you really going to sleep?"

I turn to face Miyagi and ask, only to receive a curt reply.

"Sleeping."

"What about the first sunrise?"

"I'm not watching it."

Miyagi's voice melds into the darkness, and the room falls silent. I blink my eyes open and closed. In the darkness, I can see the outline of the penguin, not Miyagi.

—If only it would move over a bit.

I slide the penguin halfway under the blanket. Now I can see the back of Miyagi's head more clearly, and I reach out to brush her hair, which seems as dark as black coffee without milk or sugar. Miyagi curls away, trying to escape my touch.

"…Sendai-san."

Her quiet voice reaches me.

"What?"

"Since entering university—"

Her words trail off, and the room becomes silent again. I wait for her to continue, but her voice never follows. When I prompt her, "What's next?" she dismisses it, saying, "It's nothing."

"Say it. Now I'm curious."

I tug insistently on her sweatshirt, urging her to respond, and in a low mumble, words escape her lips.

"...I was just thinking that you must be getting invited by all sorts of people."

"Invited?"

"For meals and stuff."

"...Did Mio or Noto-senpai say something to you?"

What Miyagi just mentioned is uncharacteristic for her to say. For her to bring it up after declaring she was going to sleep suggests there's a reason, and it could only be due to Mio or senpai.

"Nothing."

"Both of them tend to exaggerate."

I have no way of knowing what was said to Miyagi, and no matter how much I ask, she probably won't tell me. However, I can guess from her tone that one, or both, of them must have mentioned that I'm popular or getting invitations.

"I'm not concerned about it," she says in a low voice.

But she doesn't sound unconcerned at all, and a pang shoots through my chest. At the same time, my heart flutters a bit.

Miyagi cares about me.

Cares that I'm being invited by various people.

My heart pounds strongly.

It's as if she's declaring she likes me, and it makes me happy.

"Miyagi, look at me."

I call her as gently as possible.

"No."

"What they told you yesterday doesn't matter. I'm not anyone else's but yours."

I place a hand on her back and make a promise. But she moves away quickly, escaping my touch. I reach to wrap my arm around

her waist to hold her, but she pushes my hand away.

"I didn't give you permission to enter my territory."

Miyagi shuffles around to face me and pushes the penguin that's half-buried in the blanket against me.

"Then you come into mine."

I take the penguin and place it against the wall, then grab Miyagi's hand. I guide her hand to my ear, where she touches my blue earring, pressing her hand firmly enough that it almost hurts as I speak clearly.

"Only Miyagi can manage me."

I don't need anyone else. Miyagi is the only one who can enter my heart.

"...You won't lie?"

"I won't."

I release her hand, and she gently caresses my earring as if to confirm my words. Her fingers trail over my neck, slide over my sweatshirt, and stop over my heart. My heartbeat pounds so vividly beneath her palm that it feels like she can sense each throb.

"Swear it again."

"I won't be anyone else's but yours, Miyagi."

I say it slowly enough for Miyagi to hear. But before I can bring my face closer to her for a promise-sealing kiss on the earring, she approaches me first.

Her breath gently brushes my neck, and my body tenses. Something warm and soft presses against me, drawing me in. I exhale a small breath at the sensation of warmth spreading, and then a sharp pain shoots through me.

Miyagi's promise-sealing kiss is not gentle.

Her teeth sink into my neck, biting hard enough to etch the memory

into my skin. I instinctively grab hold of her shoulder.

Even so, her teeth remain anchored deeply enough to make me want to cry out, and I grit my teeth. I can't breathe properly, and I tighten my grip on her shoulder. Slowly, her teeth leave my skin, and my body relaxes.

"I'm going to sleep now. Goodnight."

Satisfied, she murmurs softly. I reply with a "Goodnight," and once again, she turns her back to me.

Miyagi Is Next to Me (III)

Part 238

An hour, maybe two. It could be shorter or even longer, but without my phone in bed, I have no way of knowing how much time has passed. I reach over and touch Miyagi's hair.

I can't sleep.

Staring blankly at the ceiling, the penguin by the wall, or even the back of Miyagi's head, sleep eludes me.

I weave Miyagi's hair between my fingers, giving it a slight tug. Miyagi doesn't stir. As I release pressure, her silken hair slips from my fingers.

I sigh softly and call her name, "Miyagi." She doesn't respond, probably in deep sleep. Lying together on the bed, watching Miyagi who must be dreaming, I sense the disparity in our feelings, my stomach knotting from the weight of it.

It's at times like these that Miyagi occupies my thoughts and keeps sleep at bay.

The warmth close by, which I'd never notice if I were alone, makes my heart race. The faint sound of her breathing, barely audible yet deafening in solitude, synchronizes with my own heartbeats, sparking unnecessary fantasies and sending my drowsiness flying away.

I pick up the penguin seated beside me and clutch it tightly.

Small for a body pillow, it pales in comparison to the reassuring sight of Miyagi peacefully sleeping in front of me. When I squeeze it, it squishes easily without the kind of complaints Miyagi would surely make.

I shut my eyes tightly.

It would be easier if I could just fall asleep quietly. If, in my dreams,

I could spend the night with a version of Miyagi doing exactly as I wish, dawn would come in the blink of an eye.

One penguin, two penguins, three penguins.

Counting up to fifteen, I begin to ponder whether penguins, being flightless birds, ought to be counted by head instead of by pairs. Such thoughts only make my mind more alert.

Miyagi truly is unfair.

She makes me vow that I'll belong to nobody but her, yet she sleeps soundly beside me, showing no sign of waking. As someone who is supposed to watch over me, she ought to wake up, open her eyes, look at me, speak to me. She could even kiss me, if she wished.

I open my eyes and press my hand against Miyagi's back. She neither wakes nor moves an inch. How can she sleep so soundly?

—I know the answer.

The more I think of Miyagi, the less Miyagi thinks of me.

That's how it seems.

It's boring. Really boring.

I return the penguin to the wall and sit up, exhaling softly. In the darkness, obscured enough to hide a lurking black cat, I kiss Miyagi's ear. I stroke her shoulder showing above the covers and whisper, "Shiori."

"...Hmm?"

A murmured response reaches me, and Miyagi finally stirs. Her body turns from its side to her back, and I catch my breath. The wish for her eyes to open reverses; now I hope she keeps them closed.

"It's nothing. Go back to sleep."
"Mm, okay."

She probably didn't understand, but her sleepy voice responds. I regret leaving my smartphone on the table.

Taking a photo in the darkness seems pointless, but I want to capture a sleeping Miyagi. Then again, a video might be even better. Even if her face isn't visible, I could always listen to her sleepy voice responding to my voice in the video.

I debate whether to fetch my phone. As I shift my weight on the bed, Miyagi rustles again, turning towards me.

No good.

Retrieving my phone would mean crossing over Miyagi, and if I move too much, she'll wake up. I give up on the phone and lie back down.

"...Shiori."

I softly call Miyagi, who has turned towards me. Though calling too much might wake her, I want to call her more.

Shiori, Shiori, Shiori.

For all the times I can't call out her name, I want to say it over and over.

"Shiori."

I whisper, and almost unconsciously, Miyagi pushes me away in mild annoyance. Gently catching her hand, I kiss her fingertips. A new year begins with thoughts wandering toward the inappropriate, hoping her hand would reach out and touch me.

No good comes of bedtimes.

They revive past events, making me yearn to relive them. I cross specified territories, slipping into Miyagi's space.

I draw closer and place a gentle kiss on her lips. I touch her cheek and caress her neck. Wanting to touch more, my hand sneaks beneath her sweatshirt to touch her side. I glide my hand over her soft skin, pressing it just below her chest, making Miyagi stir. Startled, I quickly withdraw my hand from her sweatshirt.

We should have made a new promise that day.

Miyagi kept her promise on Christmas, but I made no promises for what’s next. While such things aren't everything between us, the prospect of it happening again brings happiness. Doing it repeatedly might bridge the gap between us.

By touching places unknown to anyone else, perhaps we erode the barriers separating us. It feels like breaking down the walls between my room and Miyagi's room, expanding each with every touch, revealing sides of each other we didn't know. Two rooms becoming one, intertwined.

I want to touch Miyagi again.
I want Miyagi to touch me again.

"Let's do it again."

In a small voice, I say something she'd surely refuse if she were awake, causing Miyagi to rub her eyes in sleepiness.

"...What?"

I hear her hoarse voice and stroke her hair. Whether it comes from me or Miyagi, it matters not. Any new promise would do, but this isn't the kind of promise to make with a groggy Miyagi.

"It's nothing."
"So sleepy."
"Sleep well."

A kiss to her forehead earns me a sleepy "Mm" in return.

Chapter 81

This Year, Sendai-san Remains Unchanged (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 239

"Wake up."

I give a gentle nudge to Sendai-san's legs, who seems to be enjoying a deep slumber right in front of me on the bed. Yet, she doesn't stir.

Thanks to her, I can't even turn my body, and it's getting too warm.

No matter how I see it, this situation is absurd. Had I known it would turn out like this, I wouldn't have agreed to share the bed. Although the bed belongs to Sendai-san, my territory within it should be off-limits to her.

"Sendai-san."

I call out with more force, pressing her collarbone firmly.

"Mmh."

A brief sound emanates from her, but that's all. Sendai-san continues her sleep, using me as her pillow. I don't know how it ended up this way, but the combination of her body heat and the comforter is stifling, and her arm draped over me feels heavy—it's frustrating.

"Could you move over?"

Being a pillow is supposed to be the job of the penguin plush, not mine. I don't intend to remain in her embrace forever, and I think it's about time she wakes up.

"Wake up already."

Even when I raise my voice louder than before, she just murmurs

incoherently without waking.

"This is my space."

With all my might, I push Sendai-san's body. Her arms disentangle from me, and she rolls over onto her back. I sit up, contemplating whether I should wake her from such peaceful sleep but decide against it.

"I wonder what time it is now."

The night has long ended, with light seeping through the curtains. While it's clearly too late to catch the first sunrise of the year, I can't verify the exact time without my phone.

In the dim light, I grab the penguin pushed to the bed's edge and place it on Sendai-san's chest. Almost immediately, she instinctively cuddles it close, turning towards me in a fetal position.

It's not a sight one witnesses often.

Though "cute" may not best describe her, the sight of the typically elegant Sendai-san hugging a plush toy is amusing. Maika would be astonished, and so would her friends and senpai she met yesterday if they saw this.

But they'll never get to see this side of Sendai-san.
Only a roommate like me can witness this version of Sendai-san.
I certainly won't be telling anyone about it.

I reach out, gently stroke her blue earring, and think to myself—this year isn't any different from the last. Sendai-san is still my roommate and belongs to me.

I pull the comforter back over Sendai-san and climb out of bed. After switching on the air conditioner, I pick up my phone from the table and check the screen.

9:07 AM.

It's not exactly the crack of dawn, yet not exceedingly late either. There's no time for a second round of sleep, so I sit on the edge of the bed. While I could return to my room, I opt to linger a bit longer because the amusing sight of Sendai-san is too entertaining.

I aim the phone at Sendai-san, who's using the penguin as a pillow. After a slight hesitation, I activate the camera and capture a photo of her sleeping form, causing the flash set to automatic to go off. I move closer and snap another picture, and the flash lights up again, followed by a sleepy voice.

"...What? That's bright."

Sendai-san rubs her eyes.

"Just taking photos," I reply, capturing a shot of her with her eyes half-open.

"Photos?"

Her voice sounds clearer than before.

"Well, since you wouldn't wake up, I was bored and decided to take pictures of your sleeping face."

"What? Why are you taking pictures of me sleeping without permission? Delete them!"

She springs up and turns on the light. The penguin she was hugging tumbles onto the bed, and the room brightens.

"No way. You've taken pictures without asking before, too. You said it was fine since it's a new year. Plus, it’s your own fault for not waking up. You were sleeping too soundly."

I fend off Sendai-san's attempt to grab my phone and offer her the penguin instead.

"I wasn't sleeping deeply."

"But you were sound asleep."

"I had trouble falling asleep, and just when I finally did, you woke me up."

Sendai-san, looking displeased, flops onto the bed with the penguin still in her arms, strokes its head, and flaps its wings. Then, she calls out to me, "Miyagi."

"Did you dream of something?"

Sendai-san mutters, gazing at me. I did dream. But it's not a dream I feel like sharing with her.

"I didn't."

"Really?"

"Really."

I can't possibly tell her that in my dream, she was touching me.

"I thought maybe Miyagi was having a weird dream."

She says it as if disappointed, tugging at my sweatshirt. I swat her hand away, but instead of retreating, her fingers slip under the hem and caress my side.

"...Did you do something weird to me while I was asleep?"

I break free from her touch and pin her hand to the bed. Her hand wriggles, and with a contrived grin, she denies it, "I didn't."

Lying.
Absolutely lying.

I'm sure these hands are the cause of my bizarre dream. If her hands hadn't done something strange, I wouldn't have dreamt of her touching me like that.

"I just want to touch Miyagi."

Barely over nine hours into the new year, and on New Year's Day no less, Sendai-san spouts nonsensical words and slips out of my grip. Then, she sits up, captures my hand, and kisses my fingertips.

"That’s not touching, it’s kissing, and I didn't say you could kiss me."

I complain and her fingers trail along my hand before clutching my wrist, where her lips make contact with the inside of my arm, moving up its length, tracing the veins with her tongue.

"I didn't say you could lick me either."

I push at her forehead to make her stop, and she lifts her face to look at me.

"So, touching is okay?"

Her fingers trace the path her tongue had taken, as if verifying it.

"That's not what I'm saying."

"Then what are you saying?"

Her lips brush against my neck and softly nibbles. When I push her shoulder, her tongue presses against me and travels up to beneath my ear.

When something like this happens on a bed, it reminds me of the dream.

Before awakening, in the dream, Sendai-san's hand caressed my side and touched my chest. Her hand sought more, moving down my waist, before the dream blurred and merged into obscurity with other memories.

"Don't do strange things. Back off."

I push Sendai-san away and stand up. I have no desire to turn the dream into reality. I don't intend to replicate Christmas, nor do I wish for anything beyond our current state. Her warmth is comforting, but if we continue repeating such acts, the clarity of our roommate relationship will blur and fade into ambiguity.

"What just happened was like a New Year's gift from Miyagi to me," she says, entirely unrepentant.

"Why should I have to give a New Year's gift to Sendai-san? I'm returning to my room."

I pull a tissue from the back of the platypus plush and wipe my neck and arms.

"I'm sorry. Please stay."

"No way. You might try something weird again."

"How about an exchange then? If you stay, I'll do whatever you say."

"I don't need anything from Sendai-san, so no exchange needed."

"I'd follow any order though."

"Do you really want to be ordered around that much?"

"I do. So, tell me something."

Sendai-san says this nonchalantly, without any hesitation. I toss the tissue into the trash and look at her sitting on the bed.

"That's just perverted."

She's the same as last year. Truly foolish, and there's no fun in giving orders to someone who eagerly wants them.

"Miyagi, don't you want some ozoni?"

As if carrying over last year's indulgence, Sendai-san suddenly proposes something else.

"I do."

"I'm about to make some. Let's eat together. Then, let's meet back in this room after."

Even though she's decided our schedule on her own, there's no reason to refuse. Despite eating a lot last night, I'm still quite hungry.

"…If you also make lunch, I'll consider coming back."

"Alright, deal."

With a smile, Sendai-san hops off the bed.

This Year, Sendai-san Remains Unchanged (II)

Part 240

The New Year's dish was delicious, as was the lunchtime pasta. However, I couldn't forgive the presence of broccoli in the lunch salad.

"I didn't know you hated broccoli, Miyagi. Can't you cut me some slack? Besides, if you dislike it so much, you should have said something earlier," Sendai-san replied with an exasperated sigh.

"It's your fault for not telling me there'd be broccoli. If I knew, I would have said I hate it," I retorted.

"You said you'd eat anything for lunch, remember? Plus, I gave you tomatoes instead of the salad, so let it slide."

Her answer, lacking humor or remorse, left me dissatisfied. I tapped Sendai-san on the foot with the platypus cover.

If it had just been a piece or two, I might have been willing to endure, but the salad was loaded with broccoli. While it's true she offered me tomatoes instead, being told to eat something nutritious despite my distaste felt unfair. I didn't want to start the New Year eating something I disliked.

"Tell me what you hate, Sendai-san. Next time, I'll put lots of that in your meal," I said, taking a sip of my soda from the glass on the table.

I was genuinely frustrated and didn't want to go to Sendai-san's room at all. Yet, here I was, dragged into her room, unable to complain enough to release my anger. Sharing half of the cream puff we bought yesterday didn't even begin to assuage my irritation.

Being made to change clothes just for New Years was annoying, too. I would have preferred to lounge in my sweats.

"I don't hate anything," Sendai-san coolly lied.

But whether her words were true didn't matter. Even if she disliked something, she'd eat it if I told her to, and even if she liked something, she'd refrain from if I said not to.

I usually didn't mind this about her, but today was different. It was infuriating and vexing.

"Drink this," I said, passing the glass I held to Sendai-san.

Inside was a half-finished soda, something she had mentioned not liking before.

"Drink how much of it?"

"All of it."

Sendai-san, unfazed, gulped down the entire clear liquid and set the glass back on the table.

"Miyagi, cheer up, okay?" she said softly, reaching out to me. I slapped her hand away in retaliation.

"Keep your promise to do whatever I say, and then maybe I'll cheer up."

"What are you talking about?"

"This morning, you said it. Even if you don't remember, I'll use that right when I want to."

This morning, as I was about to return to my room, Sendai-san had said, "If you stay here, I'll do whatever you say," as a bargain. I remembered clearly.

"It's fine to keep the promise, but is now the right time for an order?" Sendai-san accepted the idea of being commanded without fuss.

"I don't have any orders right now."

If I'm going to give an order, I'd rather wait and find something that she wouldn't want to do rather than force something pointless now.

I want her to be a little distressed, although she'll probably handle anything I say with a calm expression.

"Well, whenever you feel like it, Miyagi. In the meantime, could you lend me a hand?"

"A hand?"

"I'll cut your nails."

"Mine?"

"Yes, yours."

Although Sendai-san often said odd things, cutting nails came out of nowhere. With suspicion that there might be something behind it, I hesitated to extend my hand.

"…Why did you suddenly decide to cut my nails?"

"When I saw your hand this morning, your nails seemed a bit long," she explained, getting up without waiting for me to agree and bringing a case to the table.

"What is that?"

"What do you think? It's a nail clipper, an emery board, a buffer, and—" Sendai-san began listing the items in the case. While some names were unfamiliar, it was clear they were for shaping and polishing nails.

"Are you planning to use all of them?"

What's inside isn't the real issue. The problem is there are too many things. I thought it would just be trimming the nails, but apparently, that's not all.

"I probably won't use everything, but just in case. Miyagi, hand."

"What a hassle."

Even without anything particular to do, I wasn't keen on becoming Sendai-san's plaything.

"I'm doing the cutting, so relax."

"It sounds time-consuming."

"So what if it takes time? We're not going anywhere."

"Well, we could."

"I'm up for it, but you're the one who doesn't want to go, right?"

"I don't want to go."

"Then give me your hand. If you're against it, propose another way to pass the time."

Movies, games, manga, and novels. The options for spending time indoors with Sendai-san were limited, none appealing for New Year's. While I didn't want my nails cut, keeping her from going out meant I felt obliged to accommodate her wish a little.

"As long as it doesn't take too long," I muttered, extending my hand as she gently grasped it.

Her fingers brushed over the back of my hand, lightly tracing before settling, focusing intently on my fingers for trimming.

"What?" I questioned, as she said "Nothing" and picked up the nail clipper.

"I'll start with the thumb."

Click, click.

The nails on my thumb, forefinger, and middle finger were clipped shorter, each becoming a more manageable length.

Not having any memory of someone else trimming my nails, the experience left me feeling uneasy. I attempted to fill the silence between clippings with conversation.

"Why aren't you using some fancy nail clipper?"

"What do you mean by fancy nail clipper?"

"The kind used in movies or dramas to cut bomb wires."

"Bomb wires? …Ah, I see. You mean those nipper-type clippers. They seem scary to me, like I'd accidentally over-clip, so I've never used one," Sendai-san explained as she carefully clipped my left hand.

Click, click.

Again, from thumb to pinky finger, each nail was clipped away.

"I'll shape your nails now," Sendai-san said, grabbing an emery board that looked like an oversized popsicle stick, beginning to file the freshly clipped nails. One by one, smoothing out the edges.

"Sendai-san, do you find cutting and shaping other people's nails fun?"

"Sort of. Want me to do it again when they grow out?"

"No."

"Was that a yes?"

"You know it's not."

"That's too bad."

In a voice that didn't sound particularly disappointed, she added, "Let's just leave the cuticles as they are."

"I'm done," I insisted.

"Not yet," she said as she retrieved what she had referred to earlier as a buffer and began polishing the surface of my nails.

"This is taking too long," I protested.

"Well, we don't have anything else to do," she reasoned.

While I disagreed, there wasn't sufficient cause to protest strongly, so I let her continue. As a result, my nails became so shiny they seemed almost foreign. Then, Sendai-san picked up a nearly empty bottle of nail oil.

If it were something she received from Maika, I would have refused it on principle. But this bottle was unfamiliar; before I could decline, she started applying the oil.

The oil was meticulously massaged into my nails, and even onto the surrounding skin, as the already scant bottle continued to deplete. Occasionally, her hands would stray to caress the bases of fingers that didn't require oil, and her lips would press softly against the joints.

It felt like some sort of enchantment was being cast, rendering me unable to stop it.

Probably spending more time than needed, she applied the oil before finally lifting her head.

"All done, beautiful," she declared with satisfaction, finishing with a kiss on the tip of a nail, like completing a ritual.

"I'm exhausted," I murmured.

"But we're not done yet. I'm gonna do your toenails, too, so sit over there," she said, pointing to the bed matter-of-factly.

"I'm good," I replied.

"Not good enough. Toenails need trimming too, so be a good sport and let me," she smiled.

Her face didn't change from its usual expression as she insisted. Trimming toenails. Using the bed as just a makeshift chair. That's all it was supposed to mean, I told myself.

Yet somehow, the notion of sitting on the bed was inexplicably linked to having my feet licked in my mind. Normal people don’t lick someone else’s feet without being told. No, even if ordered, they wouldn’t do it.

"Miyagi," she prompted, looking at the bed.

Worried she might think I was dwelling on something bad as I hesitated, I quietly sat on the bed. This naturally resulted in me looking down at her.

This scene was one I'd seen many times.

It hasn’t happened recent, but it was still a familiar occurrence and shouldn't make my heart race—yet it did.

For some reason, Sendai-san stroked my heel without the nail clippers, letting her fingertips trail to the bottom of my foot. It was reminiscent of when I’d let her lick my feet, and again my heart thudded.

"Stop messing around and cut my nails already," I snapped.

As I tried to escape the hands lingering on my feet, I kicked Sendai-san's knee. Without a word, she placed the clippers on my toenail, trimming it just as she had with my fingers.

Click, click.

The sounds echoed throughout the room, and once finished, she again kissed the tip of my toes without being asked. I couldn't discern her face clearly, so it was unclear what prompted this action.

"There's no need for that," I stated, as Sendai-san's tongue brushed over the top of my foot. Her hand gently rolled up my denim pants, caressing my ankle. Her tongue, warm and damp, worked its way up my foot.

The touch was soft, stirring a flutter in my heart, prompting tension to gather in my feet. Her lips pressed down, heating up my ankles.

It's strange.
This is weird.

"Sendai-san!" I called firmly.

Her lips withdrew from my ankle, leaving another kiss on my foot.

"What's going on? I didn't ask for this," I stated.

"Hey, Miyagi. Let's make a new promise," she suggested, ignoring my words.

"A promise?"

"Yes, a promise."

"…No," I replied.

"Aren't you curious about what it might be?"

"Definitely something weird, so no thanks," I declared.

Her behavior today was odd. More than could be explained by the New Year, it was overly excessive, and her proposition was suspicious.

"You're so stingy."

"I'm not stingy,"

I said, giving a light kick to her shoulder.

"Then, maybe a normal promise. How about we go to the zoo on the fourth? I'm off work that day."

"Okay, but doesn’t that mean the other promise was weird after all?"

"Well, it doesn’t matter. Zoo on the fourth—promise," she said cheerfully, leaving another kiss on my foot.

This Year, Sendai-san Remains Unchanged (III)

Part 241

There's nothing to do. No, there is something, but right now, I just don't want to do it. I know I should be studying for the exams, but thanks to Sendai-san, I can't find the motivation.

"Ah, working part-time is such a..."

Before finishing the sentence, I swallow it back. I lay on the bed, lazily rolling around under the covers, still in my sweats.

Sendai-san only has days off on New Year's and the fourth, and she told me that today, the second, she'd be working a part-time shift starting in the afternoon and is getting ready in her room.

I knew it would come to this, but this feeling of unease remains unresolved. We had lunch together, but she mentioned she'd be back late, so I should eat dinner ahead of time. Eating alone doesn't taste good.

Honestly, people who visit cafes on January second should just disappear, and cafes should cease to exist. Everyone ought to spend the first three days of the New Year relaxing at home.

Besides, Sendai-san's friend from university, Mio-san, who's also her part-time colleague, will be at the café. I know neither of them would do anything to hurt the other, but the thought of them enjoying work together without me around makes my head hurt.

"It's so infuriating."

With a sigh, I stroke the black cat plush sitting next to my pillow. This cat, given to me by Sendai-san, has a comforting touch that slightly eases my mind.

I pull the black cat under the covers with me and change my position. Reaching for the smartphone placed against the wall, I

search for "Shoebill." Instantly, images of the strange, long-legged bird with a big beak appear on the screen.

I'd like to see this "immobile bird," as it's known, move in a zoo. But seeing it asleep might be fine too; the video I saw of a sleeping Shoebill was adorable.

Speaking of which, Sendai-san too...

On my smartphone screen, I display a picture of Sendai-san sleeping with a penguin-shaped body pillow. She looks amusingly different from her usual self. I swipe through more pictures of her from the past.

My phone now contains several pictures of Sendai-san, who I had none of back in high school. She's become a presence that not only resides in memory but is recorded in digital form, occupying my thoughts constantly. At this rate, even after our university roommate tenure ends, I'm afraid I'll keep thinking about her, which feels bothersome.

As I exhale deeply, there's a knock on the door, prompting me to sit up abruptly.

"Miyagi, can I come in?"
"Wait a sec, I'll open it."

Though she never enters without permission, I quickly grab the black cat from the covers and return it to the bookshelf. Remembering my smartphone, I return to the bed, switching the screen from Sendai-san's photograph to the lock screen. Taking a deep breath, I open the door.

“...Miyagi. Are you planning to wear sweats all day? Change your clothes.”

Before I can say anything, Sendai-san, dressed in a knit top and skirt, talks in a voice filled with mock disapproval.

"I'm not going anywhere, so it's fine."
"It's not fine. You're too lazy."
“It’s New Year’s, so laziness is allowed, right?”
“Precisely because it's New Year’s, you should at least change your clothes.”

“Sendai-san, just go to work already.”

“I will, just let me in first. You're putting on the mark, right?”

Remembering a promise different from yesterday, Sendai-san looks at me as if urging to be allowed inside the room. Since there's no reason to refuse, I let her in and close the door, breathing out softly.

When she mentioned working during winter break, I made a deal with her.

During winter break, aside from her part-time job, she's not allowed to go anywhere, and she must wear her earrings when going to work. Also, before heading to her shift, she must let me put a mark on her.

That was the agreement.

“So, where will you put the mark today?”

After saying that, Sendai-san sits down on my bed without waiting.

"Stand up and turn around."

Leaning against the door, I direct my gaze at her.

"Are you implying you'll mark my back?"
"Just follow what I say."

"That order you mentioned yesterday?"

"No, it’s not an order."

This is not the moment to use the promise where Sendai-san agreed to comply with any order I'd give. I want to save that right for a moment where I come up with something that would genuinely put her in a bind, not waste it today.

“So, I can refuse if I want?”

“If you want.”

“...All I have to do is stand up and turn around?”

"That's right."

With a short reply, she follows my words, even knowing there's no force behind them.

Sendai-san truly is dull.

The only thing she insists on is going to work, accepting almost everything else. She seems to have lost most of her will somewhere along the way.

How can I possibly put her in a bind? I don't know.

In moments like these, it'd be nice if she'd occasionally just say no.

Retrieving a towel from the closet, I grasp one of her wrists and pull gently.

"Move your other hand back too."

Clearly understanding without needing further explanation, Sendai-san quietly follows suit, moving her hands behind her back, making it easier for me to tie them with the towel. I bind her wrists tightly with the towel and speak to her.

"Face me and sit back on the bed."

She mutters "Pervert..." after turning around.

While I think Sendai-san, who obediently listens to what a pervert says, is more of a pervert, I press her shoulders lightly without saying it out loud. Resignedly, she sits on the bed.

Expecting I might mark her neck, Sendai-san wears a turtleneck knit.

Her assumption is partly correct and partly not.

I'm going to mark her neck, yes, but I don't intend to hide it under her knit. I bite into her neck just below the ear, a spot that won't be covered by the knit.

Sendai-san shudders and pulls back, but with her wrists tied, she

can't effectively resist. I pull her arm to draw her closer, pressing my lips against her neck and sucking hard.

The place I'm marking will probably be hidden by hair.
So, I leave my trace in a spot that a turtleneck can't conceal.

Sendai-san doesn't even try to resist.
She only reacted at the start.
To make sure it doesn't stand out too much, I quickly pull back.

"Miyagi. I didn't agree to having the mark visible."
"It was an agreement to mark wherever."
"That was the deal, but still..."

Sendai-san sighs.

"Sendai-san, stand up."
"Untie the towel first."
"Not yet."
"Where are you marking next?"
"You'll see once you're standing."

Saying that, I watch as Sendai-san wordlessly stands.

"And... where?"

I place my hand on her chest, over her heart.

Above the heart.

Pressing lightly, she appears surprised but doesn't utter a word, letting my hand slide down to caress the soft curve.

Sendai-san doesn't complain. She just looks at me in silence.

Seeing Sendai-san not defying me, it feels like she has become somewhat distorted.

Her accepting most of what I say isn't anything new. Yet, the reason these thoughts emerge is because she seems different from before.

There's been a clear increase in her seeking orders or engaging in actions prompted by orders.

I'm both pleased and frustrated that she's transformed from someone who wasn't like this into someone who is.

"Turn around. I'm going to untie the towel."

I remove my hand from her chest.

"Are we done?"

In a matter-of-fact manner, she speaks, and I grab her arm to turn her around, untying the towel. As I do, Sendai-san gently rubs the place I marked.

"Have a good day."

I mutter, giving her leg a gentle nudge.

"I'm off. Make sure you eat properly."

"I will, even if you don't tell me."

"Alright, I'm off then."

With a bright smile, Sendai-san leaves my room.

Chapter 82

What Miyagi Wants to See (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 242

I check the weather forecast on my smartphone.

Sunny with occasional clouds.
A 10% chance of rain.

There's nothing indicating that Miyagi might throw a tantrum about not wanting to go to the zoo today. I've checked several times since morning; the weather is fine and there's no sign of rain. You could say it's a perfect day for the zoo.

I wonder if my efforts paid off.

I take the teru-teru bozu hanging on the doorknob in my hand. It must have done its job well because Miyagi also has one in her room. I kiss the small doll made of tissue and hang it back on the doorknob. Then, I head to the shared space to prepare an early lunch.

I take out a frying pan, lay some ham in it, and crack an egg over it. Adding some water, I put the lid on, just as Miyagi comes out of her room.

"Sendai-san, let me help."
"Then, can you toast the bread?"
"Got it."

Once Miyagi starts toasting the bread, the ham and eggs finish cooking. I prepare butter and jam, place the ham and eggs on plates, and set them on the table. Miyagi soon brings two glasses of orange juice to the table, along with the toasted bread, and we both sit down.

"Let's eat."

Although it wasn't coordinated, our voices align. Miyagi spreads butter and jam on her bread and takes a bite. As I apply butter and jam to my bread, she calls out, "Sendai-san."

"What is it?"
"Is there any animal you want to see?"
"The shoebill."

I utter the name of an animal I probably would never have mentioned if not for Miyagi, and take a bite of my bread. The butter and jam blend in my mouth, offering a pleasant sweetness.

"Besides the shoebill, is there anything else?"
"What about Miyagi?"
"I'm asking what animal you want to see, not about me."

She asked me this same question last year, but no matter how many times she asks, my answer doesn't change.

Seeing Miyagi have fun is enough for me.

But that's not something to say out loud, so I replace it with a less personal response.

"I'm interested in people-watching."
"What's that? That's not an animal."

Miyagi says with a low voice, poking the egg whites with her fork.

"Humans are animals too."
"True, but still."
"Is there another animal besides shoebills that you want to see, Miyagi?"

I gaze at Miyagi's slightly disgruntled face.

"...Tigers."

Okapis or tapirs, maybe.

Last night, while I looked over the zoo map by myself, I thought Miyagi would likely mention wanting to see unique animals like that, but my prediction was completely off. I didn't expect her to

mention such a common animal like a tiger.

"What about penguins?"

I throw out the name of an animal Miyagi absolutely seems keen on seeing.

"I'll see them."

Though her reply is short, it's firm.

Indeed, she must like penguins.

I'm not sure if she'll show the same smile she had at the aquarium, but I've decided to take a photo in front of the penguins.

"After we finish eating, can I go to your room, Miyagi?"
"No way."

The answer I expected comes, and after a bite of ham and eggs, I ask for a reason.

"Why not?"
"Because you might say I should wear a skirt or something."
"You don't have to wear a skirt. I'd be worried if you caught a cold. Dress warmly. Just let me borrow your face, Miyagi."

I'd be happy if she wore a skirt, but I don't want to make Miyagi, who gets cold easily, uncomfortable. However, I do want to do her makeup.

"You could just do your own makeup instead of using my face."

Miyagi, apparently understanding my intent, furrows her brow and takes a sip of orange juice.

"Just a little, okay? Lend me your face."

I watch Miyagi, who's breaking the yolk of a fried egg with her fork.

She's cute even without makeup.
But because she's also cute with makeup on, I want to see her that way once in a while.

And.

I want to use doing makeup as an excuse to be a bit closer to Miyagi. To touch her hair and her cheek, and watch her frown grumpily up close. Despite her complaints, if I ask her to close her eyes, she will. Miyagi, who lets me apply lip balm on her, is adorable. So, I want to see that part of her for as long as possible.

"...Fine."
"You don't like it, but I can at least come to your room, right?"
"If you're just coming in, you don't have to ask every time."
"But it's okay to ask, isn't it?"
"Do whatever you want."

Miyagi replies, sounding somewhat exasperated, taking a big bite of her bread. I do the same, chewing thoroughly and eating ham and eggs. We finish our early lunch quickly, uttering "Thank you for the meal," and clean up the dishes together. Though we didn't spend a leisurely time eating, quite some time had passed, prompting me to hurry back to my room, change clothes, and put on makeup.

I decided to wear a skirt, the thing I told Miyagi she didn't have to wear. After a bit of hesitation, I tie my hair into a ponytail and head to her room, bringing along the makeup kit she was reluctant about. After knocking twice, the door opens, and there stands Miyagi, dressed warmly in a sweater and jeans, clearly expressing her reluctance.

"It's just a little, okay?"

I address Miyagi, who's been staring intently at the case containing the makeup tools, and she says, "Come in." Entering the room, I set the case on the table and take my usual seat. However, Miyagi sits in a different place than beside me, near the bed.

"Can I come over there?"

I ask, just in case.

"No."
"Then come and sit here."

I pat the spot next to me, looking at Miyagi, who takes about thirty whole seconds to decide before crawling over on all fours like a cat

and settling herself next to me. She then lightly strokes my neck.

"It’s gone already."

The spot she caresses is where Miyagi had left a kiss mark the day before yesterday, hidden just well enough by my hair. Since I have a ponytail today, she should be able to tell at a glance that no mark remains there, but I point it out anyway.

"You can see that just by looking."

Her fingers trace over where the mark used to be. The mark was very faint, so it disappeared quickly, much sooner than I expected.

"Just don’t make any noticeable ones today."

I grasp Miyagi’s hand as she strokes my neck.

The mark she left before I went to work yesterday remains in a discreet place. If she leaves one in a similar spot today, that’s fine. But I’d be troubled if she left a mark somewhere it couldn’t be hidden by clothing. We wouldn't be unable to go to the zoo, but since Miyagi leaves hickey-like marks, if they were in visible areas, I'd have to figure out how to hide them, which could delay when we leave the house.

"So it's okay if they're not noticeable?"

It’s not okay.
Since I think it’s best to be ready and leave the house early, and today is not a workday, it shouldn’t be okay, but I do want Miyagi to leave a mark on me. I even consider accepting something noticeable.

Even the day before yesterday…

The mark, positioned where a turtleneck couldn't conceal it, wasn't so prominent as to be overly noticeable. It was obscured by my hair but still could have been seen by someone. I could have covered it with foundation if I wanted to, yet I chose not to mask it when I went to work.

Perhaps, deep down, I wanted someone to notice it.

More specifically, I wanted Mio to point out that it was a kiss mark and to ask who had left it. Even though I knew things would get complicated if Mio learned about my feelings for Miyagi, a part of me wished for it.

In the end, nobody noticed the faint mark.

"I'm not saying anything like that. Just stay still while I do your makeup."

Releasing her hand, Miyagi furrowed her brow in reluctance but didn't voice any complaints. So, I gave her a light makeup touch-up and then kissed her.

"Sendai-san, you always do unnecessary things."

Miyagi, speaking in a low voice, pushed me away by the shoulder.

"Come on, it's just a kiss."
"It's not okay. Let's go already."

Miyagi stood up and put on her coat. She grabbed her scarf and gloves without leaving a mark on me and called out to me with an urgent "Sendai-san."

"Wait for me at the entrance," I told Miyagi before returning to my room to put on my coat. When I got to the entrance, Miyagi was already waiting for me. We put on our shoes and stepped outside.

I descended the stairs first, then turned around to look at Miyagi.

She wore a scarf matching my earrings.

I thought the blue stones and blue sky perfectly complemented her blue scarf.

We're off to the zoo. Though I'm the only one seeing this outing—just a simple fun day with a friend—as a date, I hope today turns into a wonderful day.

What Miyagi Wants to See (II)

Part 243

"Hey, Miyagi, are you cold?"

I look over at her as we pass through the usual spot where we might see Mike-chan.

"I'm fine."

Miyagi responds in a distant voice, her nose red from the cold.

The weather is clear and the temperature is relatively high, but that's all within the context of winter. The blueness of the sky and the brightness of the sun are a far cry from summer.

No matter how warmly we're dressed, the wind that brushes our cheeks on our way to the station is cold, and the weak sunlight isn't enough to completely dispel the chill. Something warmer is needed, I think.

"Should we grab some disposable hand warmers from the convenience store?"

I suggest the first thing that comes to mind for warmth. Miyagi looks somewhat unimpressed, even though she seems cold despite her scarf and gloves.

"Sendai-san, if you're that cold, maybe you shouldn't have worn a ponytail today."

"I was thinking you might want to use them, Miyagi."

"I said I'm fine."

With a puff of white breath, Miyagi quickens her pace. I match her speed, feeling my ponytail sway behind me and exposing my neck to the chill. It's not exactly a winter-friendly hairstyle, and it's slightly cold, but I like how it shows off my blue earrings.

"When's the last time you went to the zoo, Sendai-san?" Miyagi asks, not looking at me.

"Back in elementary school, I think. Maybe fifth or sixth grade."

"I remember you saying that you went to the zoo with your family once. Was it then?"

Apparently, Miyagi remembers the conversation we had on our way back from the aquarium.

"Yeah, that's right. What about you?"

I look at her, though I can't see her ears. I think it'd be nice if she wore her hair like mine so I could see her earrings, but I also think she might catch a cold that way.

"I went with my class on an elementary school field trip."

"Never went with friends?"

"Do friends normally go to the zoo together?"

"…Maybe not."

I'm not really sure what's typical. But neither Miyagi nor I have ever gone to the zoo with friends or even talked about doing so. At least for us, the zoo isn't a friend-hangout spot.

In that regard, perhaps the zoo is the perfect destination for us who aren't exactly friends.

We're neither family nor on a school trip, but we're going to the zoo for fun.

It seems like there's something special about that.

"Oh, by the way, Miyagi, today I can take pictures, right?"

"No."

Her prompt refusal doesn't sway my decision to capture Miyagi in photographs today. If I sneak a photo, it might lead to a debate over whether or not to delete it. So I'm really just getting her permission

as a courtesy. Her saying no doesn't mean I'll accept it.

"Aren't you going to take pictures of the animals?"

I ask Miyagi as she continues walking straight ahead without looking at me.

"Was that you granting permission for me to take animal pictures just now?"

"I thought you'd be photographing the shoebill. Aren't you?"

"…I want to, but."

"Then let's take pictures of animals, and humans as a bonus."

"I don't need the bonus. Animals are enough."

"Humans are animals too, so it's fine."

"Why are you always so careless at times like these, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi furrows her brow at me.

"It'll be fine."

I want to preserve today on my phone, so I can look back on it whenever I want.

"…If it's just a bonus."

Miyagi reluctantly mutters and quickens her pace again. Matching her speed, the scenery moves by faster than if I were alone. Under the blue sky, Mike-chan doesn't appear, and we reach the station. We pass through the ticket gates and board the train that arrives at the perfect moment.

"What should we see first?"

On the moderately noisy train, swaying slightly, I ask Miyagi.

"Anything's fine."

"I'm not sure if we have time to see everything, so how about we

look at elephants first, then head to the tigers while seeing things along the way, and finally the penguins and the shoebill?"

I offer up a route I planned in advance, recalling the zoo map in my mind.

"I'll leave it to you."

I respond as expected with a "Leave it to me." We continue our light-hearted chatter until we reach our destination station. Getting off the train and walking for about five minutes, we see the zoo entrance. We pay the admission fee and enter. Although I have the route memorized, I grab a pamphlet with a map and head towards the elephants.

Despite being winter, there's a fair number of people inside, and it's crowded. Whether it's the greatness of winter breaks or the sheer number of animal enthusiasts, I can't tell, but there's a lively and fun atmosphere.

Walking beside me, Miyagi doesn't appear annoyed.

But it seems she doesn't have much affection for elephants, as she quickly heads toward the prairie dogs as soon as we arrive. Prairie dogs might not be particularly rare, but she seems to prefer them over elephants.

I pull out my smartphone from my bag and snap a picture of Miyagi looking at the prairie dogs. As she reacts to the click, I point the camera at a grass-eating prairie dog and take another shot. Then, I keep my phone in my coat pocket, ready to photograph Miyagi at any moment.

"Look, there's an otter over there."

I smile and tell Miyagi.

"Let's go."

With that, Miyagi bypasses the pheasants and stops in front of the otters, taking her phone out of her bag. She doesn't photograph me but snaps several pictures of the otters before we move on.

She doesn't seem that interested in elephants and pheasants, likes

prairie dogs more but not enough to photograph them, and otters she likes enough to take pictures of.

I really can't grasp Miyagi's preferences.
The one thing I can be certain of is that I'm not someone worth photographing for her, at least not more so than the otters.

Not that I particularly want to be photographed. But feeling like I've been overshadowed by an otter doesn't sit well with me.

"Sendai-san, tigers."

Miyagi stops next to me and points a little ahead.

"They've got quite a big space."

Following her pointed finger, I see a tiger padding along calmly in the forest-like area dense with grass and trees. We approach the glass that separates us from the tiger to get a closer look.

"I hope it comes over here."

Miyagi murmurs quietly, but the tiger only paces around the pond and doesn't seem inclined to approach the glass.

"It'd make for a great picture if it did."

I pull my smartphone from my pocket and take a shot of Miyagi. I save her image once, twice to my phone, and take a third photo of the tiger. When I then aim my phone at Miyagi again, the screen is suddenly full of her palm.

"You don't need to take pictures of people; focus on the tiger."

Pushing my phone away with her hand, Miyagi's voice sounds annoyed.

"I am looking."

"No, you're not. Turn your face that way."

She points towards the tiger, and reluctantly, I shift my gaze to the glass beyond. But I'm more interested in Miyagi standing next to me, not moving, than the tiger prowling about.

“Don’t you like tigers, Miyagi?”

“I do like them.” Miyagi’s voice, though low, firmly asserts.

When I tucked my smartphone back into my pocket and shifted my gaze from the tiger to Miyagi, I was met with a disappointed expression.

"...Did you know tigers are part of the cat family?"

"I know that."

"Never mind. Let’s move on."

Miyagi spoke with a note of disinterest, then began to walk away.

"Hey, wait a second!"

I quickly followed the trailing sax blue scarf, and a curt voice reached me, "Hurry up, Sendai-san." It was clear that Miyagi had no intention of waiting, so I grabbed her arm.

"...Did you say you wanted to see the tigers for my sake?"

Perhaps because I had once mentioned my fondness for cats, she specifically suggested we look at tigers, which are felines. It was hard to wrap my head around, but maybe that was her reasoning.

"Not really. I just wanted to see the tigers myself."

"The tigers were incredibly cute, just like big cats."

"If you don’t like them, just say so."

Her voice was clearly unhappy.

"I do like them."

"Then why didn’t you mention tigers when I asked what you wanted to see?”

Miyagi stared intently at me. Her gaze wasn’t as cold as the winter air, but it was piercing. I let out a small breath and clenched the

smartphone in my pocket.

It seemed, at least, that Miyagi was more interested in me than the otters.

"I just forgot to mention it."

I replied in my usual voice and released her arm. Instead, I took her hand. More precisely, I held her hand, and she didn’t pull away.

“What do we look at next?” Miyagi murmured.

"Oh, um, maybe the tapirs? There are polar bears further on if you want to head there."

"Let's check out the tapirs first, then move on."

We both started walking, and soon we reached the tapirs. However, Miyagi didn’t find them very interesting and quickly suggested moving on to see the polar bears.

The hand I've been holding feels different, covered in a fluffy glove rather than its usual smoothness.

I found myself wishing she didn’t have the gloves on.

What Miyagi Wants to See (III)

Part 244

Right before the polar bear exhibit, Miyagi stops in front of the seals and sea lions.

It feels more like a visit to an aquarium than a zoo, with chubby creatures lounging on land or swimming around in the water. Naturally, Miyagi stares intently at the marine animals with their round, black eyes, just as she does at the aquarium.

"Sendai-san, which ones have ear flaps again?"

One of the differences between seals and sea lions. Whether or not they have ear flaps. Miyagi seemed to remember our discussion about it when we came back from the aquarium.

"Sea lions," I answered.

That day, I explained to her that sea lions have ear flaps, like earlobes, and kissed her earlobe, so it stuck with me.

"Ah, you're right. It does look like they have ears."

Miyagi's mood had soured while we were watching the tigers, but the marine animals seemed to have lifted her spirits, and her voice was brighter.

"Hey, Miyagi," I called out as she continued to watch the sea lions.

"What?"

"We're going to the aquarium again, right?"

We promised to go back to the aquarium to confirm the difference between seals and sea lions, but now that we knew, I feared the promise from that day might be forgotten.

"Don't you want to go, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi turned away from the sea lions to look at me.

"I do want to go, but you've already seen the sea lion's ears."

"Sendai-san, you're not really into fish, right? If you don't want to go, we don't have to."

Her voice took on a disgruntled tone as she turned back to the sea lions.

Even on our aquarium visit, she said something similar, asking if I was really into fish enough to want to go repeatedly, taking me by surprise. Today's Miyagi felt the same, as if considering my preferences.

It's not like her to say things that make it clear she saw the tigers for my sake, it catches me off guard.

This side of her makes my heart flutter, yet it's so unlike her usual self that I feel unsteady, like I'm floating.

"The aquarium was fun, let's go again," I said, gripping her hand tighter. The fond memories from the aquarium were tied to today, with us at the zoo. I want to keep the promise alive so we can stay together.

"If there's something you want to see, we can go," Miyagi said quietly.

"I'd like to see the penguins fly again."

"...In that case, a trip to the aquarium would be okay."

"Then it's settled, we'll go," I declared, solidifying the plan before her mercurial mood could change. As Miyagi said, "Let's see over there," we started walking hand in hand towards the nearby polar bears. A short walk brought a large, white figure into view.

"Did you want to take pictures of the seals and sea lions?"

"No," she replied briefly, stopping at a spot with a good view of the polar bear, forcing me to stop too.

I don't want to let go of your hand, so no pictures.

Of course, Miyagi would never say that, but if she did, I'd be happy. It leaves me wondering why she wants to keep holding hands.

Normally, Miyagi would try to pull away in these situations, so her willingness to stay connected must have a reason.

Could it be to make me happy? That possibility crosses my mind, and I shift my gaze from Miyagi to the polar bear. The same white bear reflects in my eyes.

Two bears playing together, brimming with pointless energy.

"Polar bears don't seem like they'd be cold in winter," Miyagi comments quietly, studying the bears.

"Maybe, but I bet they're sweltering in the summer."

"As long as they're warm in winter, isn't that alright?"

"If you were a polar bear, Miyagi, I'm sure you'd complain about the heat in summer."

"I wouldn't."

"You totally would."

I can picture a white, polar bear Miyagi sprawling out in the room, grumbling, and it makes me smile.

"Sendai-san, you're annoying," she says, elbowing me dramatically and I clutch my arm in mock pain. Then she asks, "Aren't you cold with a ponytail?"

"I'm not a polar bear, so it's a bit chilly."

"Then why wear it in a ponytail if you're cold?"

"...Because it shows off my earrings. Let me see yours, Miyagi."

"No. It's cold."

"Then, how about a picture with the polar bear? Just tuck your hair behind your ear."

I expect her to decline. If it's Miyagi, she'll surely say no.

But even if Miyagi doesn't tuck her hair or show her earrings, I'm determined to take her picture, so her answer doesn't matter. If she agrees, that's just a bonus, but I don't expect it.

"Let go of my hand," Miyagi says in a low voice, contrary to my expectations. Reflexively, I tighten my grip. But she quickly shakes her hand free and tucks her hair behind her ear.

"Eh?"

I involuntarily let out a sound. Though it's just one side, her plumeria earrings are visible.

"Take the picture."

Her voice is disgruntled, not what you'd expect from someone who wants their photo taken, and she nudges my shoulder to position me. Hurriedly, I pull out my phone and snap a picture.

Click.

Distractedly tapping the screen, the photo ends up without the polar bear.

"Sorry, let me take another one. Smile, please," I ask, addressing Miyagi, who wears a serious expression. She doesn't smile, of course. Although there's no furrow in her brow, I capture her unsmiling image and try again, "Come on, smile," this time seeing her serious face looking straight at me rather than the phone.

"Sendai-san."

"What?"

The polar bear approaches behind her, and I snap a picture.

"Are you enjoying the zoo?"

"Yes," I respond, beaming to show my current feelings.

Her mouth seems to relax slightly, prompting me to quickly capture

her face and the polar bear.

"That's good. Let me take your picture, Sendai-san," Miyagi says, slipping off her gloves and pulling her phone from her coat pocket.

"Eh?"

"I'll take it with the polar bear. Stand here."

Though surprised, I have no reason to refuse, so I quietly swap places with her.

"Get ready, Sendai-san."

She raises her phone from the spot I previously occupied. I consciously smile at her, the camera clicking as she warns, "You're smiling too much."

"What's wrong with smiling?"

"Too much smiling."

With that, she takes another picture.

"The polar bear didn't come out cute," Miyagi murmurs, glancing at her phone.

"And me?"

From her lips, I inquire, and she returns with a lukewarm "It's okay."

"'Okay'? Let me see the pictures."

I moved next to her to peek at her phone.
On the screen was a picture of me looking happy, with playful polar bears in the background.

"It's a good shot," I commented.

"The polar bears, you mean?"

Miyagi said something cheeky.

"I meant both me and the polar bears."

"If you say so," she replied dismissively.

"Just accept it. Want to watch the polar bears a little longer?"

"I'm good."

"Shall we head to the penguins then?"

"What about the shoebills?"

"They're just past the penguins. How about we see the penguins first?"

"Sure."

Miyagi tucked her phone back into her pocket, donned her gloves, and started walking. Her gloved hand was no longer holding mine, and she walked ahead, a steady pace separating us.

"Miyagi, what about my hand?"

I caught up to her and gently tapped the back of her gloved hand.

"I won't hold it."

"In that case, you don't have to hold my hand, but keep your hair as it is, okay?"

Whether she'd forgotten, or for some unknown reason, the plumeria earrings I had picked out were still on display.

"I'll catch a cold."

"Just a little longer, please?"

Her brows furrowed briefly in response to my plea, and though she started to raise her hand to her ear, she stopped. Her hair remained as it was, leaving the plumeria earrings visible to anyone.

"Miyagi, do you like polar bears?"

"Rather than like, I'd say they're cute. What about you, Sendai-san?"

"I think I do. They're like stuffed animals."

The way Miyagi gazed intently at the polar bears was adorable, and I didn't dislike the polar bears for giving me an opportunity to capture a photo with an unobstructed view of her earrings.

"So, you like stuffed animal-like creatures?"

"Not really."

Any animal is fine. It doesn't even have to be cute. As long as Miyagi looks like she's having fun, that's enough for me.

"Then what kind of animal?"

Miyagi seemed unusually talkative today, or rather, full of questions. I'm glad she's interested, but since it's not like her usual self, I have no idea how to respond correctly.

"Well, let's see... the prairie dogs were cute."

Though Miyagi, eagerly watching them, was too. I mused silently before hearing her say from beside me, "Sounds like a lie."

"It's not."

"Hmph."

She replied in a curt tone, quickening her pace. It's a fair distance to the penguin area, so I hastened my steps to match hers.

Chapter 82 Extra

Platypus' Soliloquy

(Platypus PoV)
Part 242-extra

Lately, I haven't been feeling very amused.
I know the reason for that.

It's because of that round newcomer who snuck into our master's futon on Christmas.
That penguin is the reason why things aren't interesting anymore.

Since it arrived, our master has been less affectionate towards me, a tissue box cover shaped like a platypus. Not that I was particularly pampered before, but now it feels like I'm even more neglected.

For one, the penguin has a name—Pen-chan—while I don't.

Even though I've been serving the crucial role of dispensing tissues from my back, a name like "Kamo-chan" would be nice. If "Kamo-chan" isn't suitable, "Nohashi" would work too, but it seems like our master won't call me either of those.

It's unfair that not only does the penguin have a name, but it is sometimes even referred to as "Shiori." I think I could at least be a substitute for the one who calls our master "Sendai-san," but I'm not being given that chance.

I feel a disparity in affection.
But I don't want to be number one.
For our master, the number one is Shiori Miyagi.

Shiori Miyagi, the person who called our master "Sendai-san" and was the reason I ended up in this household. She's our master's important person, a peculiar one who visits this room, holds my hand, and sometimes uses me to hit our master.

Our master seems to like those kinds of humans.

I don’t mind that our master’s number one is Shiori Miyagi, nor do I hate when she takes my hand, but using me to hit our master feels wrong. I don’t want to be used to strike our master.

Yet, our master, if smacked, kicked, or even bitten by Shiori Miyagi, not only doesn't mind but often seems pleased. So, I reluctantly accept it when Shiori Miyagi uses me for that purpose.

However, accepting the penguin is difficult.

I too want to be kissed and hugged by our master like that penguin. But seeing as our master kisses Shiori Miyagi more than the penguin, the penguin will never be number one.

Shiori Miyagi is number one, and the penguin remains eternally second.

...How strange. It vexes me.

I should be number two.
Being the newcomer, the penguin should be relegated to third.

If it becomes third, then maybe I'll consider being friends with the penguin.

After all, its flat feet somewhat resemble mine. Plus, the penguin has a beak. Maybe I'll consider having a little conversation with it someday.

But absolutely.
That conversation can only happen once I become our master's number two.

Chapter 83

The Things Sendai-san Likes (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 245

Penguins are always adorable. Unsurprisingly, today is no exception; they are irresistibly cute.

I find myself wanting to watch the penguins waddling around the small, castle-like structures or swimming in the pool forever.

Yet, Sendai-san doesn't seem to share my enthusiasm for the penguins.

It's strange. Absolutely strange. There is something wrong with her.

"Sendai-san, forget about the humans and take pictures of the penguins."

I cast a disapproving glance at her smartphone, buzzing noisily. The zoo is not a place for taking pictures of me.

"I'm taking pictures of the penguins too."
"Not 'too,' 'only' the penguins."
"Miyagi, you're so stingy."

With those words, she takes a photo. Naturally, her smartphone is pointed at me instead of the penguins, and I realize I've been captured on her device.

Removing my gloves, I pull out my phone from my pocket and aim it at Sendai-san, who only seems to take pictures of me. As I tap the shutter button, she agrees to be part of the day's captured moment, as the shutter sound accompanies her being saved onto my device.

"Miyagi, if you're going to take pictures, at least give me a heads up."
"If I did, you'd make a good face, and I don't want that."

"Why not take a picture of me making a nice face?"
"There's no need to force it."
"Come on, the last picture didn't even capture my face properly. If you're going to take a photo, do it right."

Sendai-san gives a charming smile, as if to signal, "Okay, go ahead and take the picture." So, I raise my phone and take a photo of the penguins instead of her.

"That's where you're supposed to take a picture of me, not the penguins."

As she expresses discontent, I capture her non-smiling face in a shot.

"I'd rather you capture me smiling."
"...I'm more interested in capturing you without a forced smile."

Today, her smile is on my mind. Even though we're at the zoo, I feel compelled to complain about the smiles she constructs.

"Why? Isn't it better to have pictures showing you're having fun?"
"I think being normal is fine."
"Isn't it normal to want to be captured smiling when you're having fun?"

Her logic is sound, and I know her creating a smile is to capture a joyful moment. Still, I find myself wanting to criticize the contrived smiles because I'm not sure if they truly reflect her happiness.

Today's Sendai-san reminds me of her appearance at school. It's a feeling that resonates.

Back in high school, Sendai-san was always friendly with everyone. She wore a joyous expression as if school life was the best when she was next to Ibaraki-san. But after school, she showed me a side of her she didn't reveal at school.

Today, I want the real Sendai-san, not the one she pretends to be.

"So, let me take a picture of you looking like you're having fun, Miyagi."

With a cheerful voice, she once again points her phone at me. While I don't know what's so amusing, she seems intent on capturing me

rather than the animals.

At least, she appears to be having fun. If that sentiment is genuine, that's fine, but if it's not, I'd rather she not smile. If she finds the zoo dull, she should show it on her face.

"I told you earlier, take pictures of the penguins, not me."

While I want Sendai-san to look at nothing but me, today's an exception. We're at the zoo, after all, so she should admire the animals.

I'm also not accustomed to being photographed by someone with a presence as striking as hers.

The photographer should be me, the subject should be Sendai-san.

She's far more photogenic than I am, so anyone would think swapping roles makes more sense. Yet, she continues to prefer photographing over being photographed.

I dislike it. The phone she aims at me, the shutter sound it makes.

Even so, today I let her take my picture. Since she came to the zoo with me, despite not seeming interested in animals, I decide to allow it.

"Miyagi, I'll take a picture with you and the penguins, so smile."

It's a tall order. I think a slight smile might be acceptable, but it doesn't come easily.

She moves a little further away and calls my name, "Miyagi." Resignedly, I glance at her through the phone and let out a small sigh instead of a smile, and the shutter clicks.

"Sendai-san, did you manage to get the penguins in the shot too?"

Before she can ask me to smile again, I inquire, and she returns to my side.

"I did. How about we take a photo together now?"
"Together?"
"I'll try to include the penguins. Also, I'll take lots of Shoebill photos

for you, Miyagi. So, shall we take one together?"

I survey our surroundings. The zoo, though not as crowded as an aquarium in summer, has a substantial number of people. Many are snapping photos, either with family or friends, or those who seem to be couples, and numerous pairs are taking selfies, shoulders touching.

But I'm reluctant to simply agree.

A photo of just me and a photo of the two of us are different.

"You've already taken lots of pictures."
"Not with you, Miyagi."

I focus on the blue earring dangling from her ear.

A sign that she's mine.

It's not a collar, but it does serve to signify she's under my control.

With that earring as a marker, she resembles a well-groomed Borzoi and, like a dog waiting for its master's command, her gaze is fixed solely on me. It's an admirable attitude befitting the blue earring, but today, I'm not seeking a compliant Sendai-san.

"Fine, take it."

Swallowing the many words I want to say, I move to her side. When our shoulders touch, Sendai-san lifts her phone's front camera and captures a picture of the two of us.

"We got the penguins in too. Shall we head to the shoebills next?"
"Let's go."

She flashes a smile as radiant as the sun and strides off. Unable to move, I clutch my blue scarf. As I watch her walk away, she calls back to me, "Miyagi."

"Are you tired?"

Turning around, she approaches me with a soft voice, having returned the steps she'd taken ahead.

"I'm fine."

I give a quiet reply and release my grip on the scarf, taking a step forward. Right, left, right. As I move languidly, Sendai-san walks beside me.

She remains as kind as ever. Sendai-san yields almost everything to me, save for our part-time job discussions, accepting my words. Today as well, she's visiting the areas I want to see at my pace.

It's expected that she does so because she belongs to me, yet if she were opposed, she could refuse. If she finds animals uninteresting, she could say so, and we needn't have come to the zoo.

Despite that, she chooses to comply, prioritizing me.

I consider myself terribly selfish, but today it bothers me. I'm dissatisfied and anxious about the fact that Sendai-san is constantly considering my feelings. I've been concerned about this even before we came here.

"Miyagi, look at the shoebill!"

Sendai-san points ahead. Following her finger, I spot the long-legged, big-beaked bird. I quickly make my way to the barrier separating us from the shoebill, raising my phone towards the bird that looks like it had a rough night's sleep.

"...It's moving more than I thought."

I snap a picture and murmur. I had the impression that shoebills were motionless creatures, but here it is, walking slowly and occasionally catching fish in the pond. It's surprising.

"It's livelier than I expected."

Her thoughts echo mine, and I nod with a simple "Yeah." I take another picture. Despite not being the most graceful of animals, the shoebill is charming, whether it's moving or standing still.

"Sendai-san."
"What is it?"
"Are you really looking at the shoebill?"

I tuck my phone back into my coat pocket and shift my gaze from the large bird to the person next to me.

"I am," she replies, then points her phone at me.

Click.

The familiar sound plays again, and I give her shoulder a tap.

"You're photographing a human again. The target is the shoebill."
"Okay, okay."

Her response couldn't be more dismissive as she starts taking pictures of the shoebill with her phone. Her compliance, though casual, strikes me once more as resembling that of a loyal dog.

"Miyagi, are you having fun?"

Still facing the shoebill, Sendai-san poses the question.

"Yeah."

I need to shift my mindset. I should be enjoying the shoebill in front of me, not merely in images or videos.

Today's Sendai-san is her usual self, and there's nothing worth worrying about. It's best to dismiss it as just another typical day with her.

So, I pull out my phone from my pocket and focus it on the shoebill, not Sendai-san.

The Things Sendai-san Likes (II)

Part 246

Click, click.

The sound of the shutter echoes repeatedly.

It's the sound of Sendai-san taking photos, as she diligently captures images of the shoebill on her smartphone with a serious expression.

"Are you getting good shots?"

I ask Sendai-san, who is earnestly trying to keep her promise of "taking lots of shoebill photos to give to Miyagi." She pauses from tapping the shutter button and looks at me.

"Of course. I'll give you plenty of shoebill photos later."

"Thanks. Do you think the shoebill is cute, Sendai-san?"

"I do. It looks intimidating, but it's kind of charming."

Really?

I study Sendai-san's face, but I can't tell if those words come from the heart. Her feelings seem hazy, like they're hidden behind a mist, making them hard to discern.

"You like the shoebill, Miyagi?"

"Yeah, it's cute."

"Then that's good."

She flashes me a bright smile.

The ponytail that emphasizes the blue stones suits her cheerful smile well. It's a hairstyle that seems more fitting for summer than winter, yet on Sendai-san, it feels as though the season doesn't matter. The sight of her ponytail swaying in the chilly wind makes me want to

capture it on my smartphone. She's like someone who can make winter her ally, and it's unfair.

"Sendai-san, how many photos are you planning to take?"

I can't look directly at Sendai-san, so I avert my gaze. I take one more photo of the shoebill, then slip my phone back into my pocket.

"Until you're satisfied, Miyagi."

"Then, that's enough. I took some myself. Don't you have anything you want to photograph, Sendai-san?"

The sound of a shutter echoes as I finish speaking, and I tap her arm, saying, "Not like that," as she takes a picture of me.

"Well, there's nothing else I want to photograph."

"Then keep taking pictures of the shoebill."

"You just said that's enough."

"I take it back. Use your phone just for the shoebill."

I grab Sendai-san's arm and aim her phone towards the shoebill. With a resigned expression, she takes one picture before promptly aiming her phone back at me.

"Look over there."

I glare at Sendai-san's phone and point at the shoebill.

"I'm looking."

"You're not. Your phone is aimed here."

"Miyagi, you're so stingy."

With an exaggerated sigh, Sendai-san finally turns towards the shoebill. I also gaze at the large bird with its back feathers standing up slightly.

Ahead of us, the shoebill spreads its wings wide.

Sendai-san lets out a small “ah,” confirming that we're both seeing the same thing, though it doesn't feel like we're seeing it the same way.

It's a sensation as if we're viewing the same and yet different things simultaneously.

Ever since arriving at the zoo, that feeling has lingered within me.

"Sendai-san."

"What is it?"

What's your favorite animal? Are you having fun today?

Asking such things seems futile. Sendai-san only ever shares generic responses.

So then. Instead, tell me your true feelings.

I could use my earring to make her promise and reveal the truth, but that feels wrong. Forcing her to speak her mind through the earring would be a mistake.

"...The shoebill is cute."

I swallow the words I wanted to say and instead voice my uninteresting impression.

With a sigh, I touch my plumeria earring. Lightly stroking the small flower before deciding to hide it with my hair, Sendai-san grabs my arm.

"It's cute, so leave it as it is."

"It's not cute."

I respond in a low voice to Sendai-san, who gazes intently at me.

"I think the earring suits you. It's cute."

"Sendai-san, you're being annoying."

"Isn't it okay to call something cute?"

Letting out a sigh at Sendai-san's cheerful grin, I find myself longing for her to share something meaningful instead of unnecessary chatter.

"Let go of my hand."

"Will you leave your ear like that?"

"I will if you let go."

"Alright."

Sendai-san's hand releases mine, and my arm is free again. My unshielded ear feels cold. I shove my hands into my pockets, looking at the shoebill with a displeased expression.

"...Sendai-san. Are you really enjoying the zoo?"

Even though I resolve not to, I find myself asking similar questions over and over.

"I've been saying it's fun all along, haven't I?"

As expected, she gives the same reply, and I exhale softly. Then, as much as I exhale, I breathe in. Along with the cold air comes a rough feeling that settles within, passing through my esophagus and resting in my stomach, leaving me uneasy.

"…I keep asking because it's still on my mind."

I murmur in response, delving into my memory.

What was it like when we went to the aquarium?

That day was much like today. There were no shoebills, but Sendai-san and I watched the seals and penguins together. However, back then, I was more focused on enjoying myself rather than thinking about Sendai-san as much as I do now. Instead of asking if she was having fun, I was more interested in hearing the answer to "Do you have someone you like, Sendai-san?" that I asked when Maika came over.

Ultimately, I couldn't hear Sendai-san's true feelings at the aquarium

either.

She brushed it off, saying her favorite was the cat, Mike-chan.

Sendai-san is difficult to understand.

There's so much I don't know, and it frustrates me.

I clench my hand within my pocket. The tips of my fingers are extremely cold. Though the weather is clear, the wind has picked up, so I move a little closer to Sendai-san.

My shoulder barely brushes against hers. The thick coat prevents me from feeling her warmth, but the scent of our shared shampoo brushes against my nose. No, maybe it's just my imagination. Still, it's reassuring to find even a small connection with her amidst today's absence of mutual interests.

"It's truly fun, so don't worry."

Sendai-san smiles, suggesting, "Shall we go see the crocodiles?"

"Why crocodiles?"

"Why not? Your tissue box cover at home looks like a crocodile."

"The tissue cover being a crocodile is just a coincidence."

"Then, should we skip it?"

"...Let's go see."

"Since we're here, let's see the okapis first, then the crocodiles. The okapis are just over there."

Saying so, Sendai-san begins to walk, and I pull my hand out of my pocket to grab hers.

“Do you want to see the okapis?”

Physical proximity might not mean anything, but right now, being closer is better than being far. It might help melt the anxiety lingering in a corner of my heart.

"Let's see them."

I tighten my grip on the hand I grasped and step forward.

One step, two steps.

I stride forward as if dragging along Sendai-san, who looks puzzled.

The hand I hold is cold, but if I keep holding it, warmth should return soon enough. I hope it warms quickly as usual. I need something akin to a pocket warmer, and there's no substitute except for Sendai-san. Of course, she isn't disposable like a pocket warmer, but I need to warm my chilled hands. Gloves aren't enough to warm my hands.

We watch the okapis and head to the building with crocodiles. It's not as cold as outside, perhaps because it's a greenhouse, but I continue holding Sendai-san's hand.

"Sendai-san, out of everything we saw today, tell me your favorite animal."

I tug on her hand, knowing full well that she won't answer, and ask a question I already know is futile. Yet today, I can’t seem to resist asking.

"What about you, Miyagi?"
"You first, Sendai-san."
"You go first."
"You start, Sendai-san."
"Hmm... isn't it hard to pick just one favorite?"
"It's not hard at all, so tell me your number one."

I squeeze Sendai-san's indecisive hand tightly. Though I don't have the strength to actually cause pain, I apply enough pressure so that she might protest, prompting her to speak quietly.

"Even if you say that, you know, it's not something to be so particular about. What’s the big deal about choosing a favorite animal, anyway?"
"Sendai-san."

As I move to relinquish my firm grip, she hastily interjects, "Okay, okay, I'll answer."

Looking at her, I see Sendai-san furrow her brow in rare concentration. Observing her like this makes me feel as though I'm being cruel, prompting me to change my question.

"If you can't say your favorite animal, then tell me one animal from today that you'd like to see again."
"An animal I'd like to see again?"
"Yeah."
"Hmm, well... if I had to pick one, I guess it would be the shoebill."
"That sounds like a lie. Answer honestly."
"Then, how about Miyagi watching the shoebill?"
"What is that? Answer seriously."

In front of the indifferent-looking crocodile, I glare at Sendai-san.

"I'm being serious. I want to see Miyagi watching the shoebill again. You don't go out with me much, right? So, when we do go out, I want to see what you want to see, Miyagi, and I want to watch you see it."

Her words, which feel like excuses, wash over me, and I suppress the urge to kick Sendai-san's leg.

She seems to have neither favorite things nor things she wants to see.

The things I like.
The places I want to visit.

I thought Sendai-san was merely being considerate of me, focusing on such things. But it feels like there's more to it than that.

A program to accommodate me.

It seems like something ingrained in her.

"I'm not something to watch."

I voice my dissatisfaction quietly, and Sendai-san replies in a gentle tone.

"I know, but I still want to watch. Show me Miyagi watching the shoebill again."

"You're dodging the question."
"I'm not."
"...I'll ask you about your favorite animal or the one you want to see again sometime, so answer properly then."

There's little point in continuing to banter back and forth.
The issue isn't whether she's evading the question or not, but it serves as a pending assignment.

"I'll think about it."
"There's nothing to think about."

Sendai-san is mistaken.
You don't need to deliberate on what you like or prepare an answer.

We exit the building housing the crocodiles and head outside.
The wind whips around us sharply, making my shoulders shiver.

"Miyagi, you look cold."

With that, Sendai-san releases my hand and gently brushes over my earring. She returns my hair over my ear to hide the earring, rewrapping my scarf snugly around my neck without a word.

"The wind is picking up, should we head back soon? The exit is close. We can double back to see the animals we haven't yet, though."
"No, let's go home. We'll come back to the zoo another time."

I clutch the end of the rewrapped scarf.

"You don't mind coming back to the zoo?"
"I said earlier that I'll ask about your favorite animal or the one you want to see again."
"So that's why you wanted to come to the zoo again."
"If you don't want to, we don't have to."
"I don't mind. There's also the aquarium, so I wondered if it was okay. Are you sure?"
"...We have time until we graduate from university."

Next time, I want to know something she genuinely likes, other than Mike-chan the cat.

Since we'll be living together for a while longer, it would be nice to

learn at least one more thing that she likes.

"Does that mean we'll visit both?"
"You decide, Sendai-san."
"Then let's agree to do both, and head home today."

I'm not certain she's really interested, but Sendai-san smiles softly and clasps my hand.

Her hand feels cold, but not so cold that I want to let go.

I return her gentle squeeze.
Sendai-san begins to walk slowly, and we leave the zoo behind.

Chapter 84

The Usual Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 247

Our connected hands can't remain joined forever, and vacations inevitably come to an end. The more you wish that time would stretch out, the faster it seems to pass by.

Perhaps it's because my mind is still stuck in the winter break, entering the lecture room doesn't make me feel like the university has truly resumed. Instead of feeling motivated, all I can do is sigh. Even though I managed to arrive early at the college, it seems quite pointless.

"Ah, I should have taken a day off today."

While I don't lay my head on the desk, I can't stop the backward-looking words from spilling out of my mouth. Although Miyagi also started university today, and going home wouldn't mean finding anyone there, my heart stubbornly wants to head home.

"You're unmotivated from day one? It's rare for you to say something like that, Hazuki. Did something happen?"

Mio, sitting next to me, remarks in a tone that's more amused than truly concerned.

"I just wished the winter break could last forever."
"Did you want to work more at your part-time job?"
"I like working, but I also wanted to go out a bit more."

"What? Hazuki, who usually avoids going out, saying this means there’s someone you want to hang out with? Did you get a boyfriend over the winter break?"

Mio's eyes twinkle with interest as she leans towards me. Her curiosity is taking a turn for the worse.

This is a bothersome topic that won't easily be believed even if I try to skirt around it.

Gently pushing Mio's shoulder to create a bit of distance, I continue, "Come on, Mio, you know from work that I didn't get a boyfriend. I just wish I had a little more time to go out, that's all."

It's true that I don't have a boyfriend, but saying there isn't someone I want to go out with would be a lie. I wanted to go out with Miyagi. More and more and more. Our short winter break wasn't nearly enough for all the outings I craved.

"You sure there's not someone special?"
"There isn't. End of story."
"Alright, if you say so. Oh, right, you mentioned you went to the zoo with Shiori-chan?"

Shiori-chan. Hearing that name, which I dislike, I intentionally raise my voice's pitch to counteract my threatening drop in tone.

"Yeah, I did."
"And the souvenirs?"

Mio flashes a beaming smile and holds out her hand.

When we met at our job, I casually mentioned the zoo trip with Miyagi. Naturally, I told her there weren't any souvenirs.

"I told you before, there aren't any."
"Well, you might've just forgotten. It's okay to remember if you got something."
"I didn't forget, and the zoo isn't far enough to warrant buying souvenirs."
"Then show me the pictures."
"Pictures?"
"Yeah, the ones you took at the zoo. You promised to show them, remember?"

That promise was made during a break at work, and I never ended up showing them.

"Alright then."

I retrieve my phone from my bag, pulling up the photos. Handing my phone over to Mio, I wait as she flips through the memories from the zoo, whereupon she soon breaks into an ambiguous noise that is neither disbelief nor mere astonishment.

"Did you, like, force Shiori-chan to go to the zoo?"

Only Miyagi's friends are allowed to call her Shiori, and Mio is not among them. Of course, I'm not either, but just because I can't use that name doesn't give Mio the right to. I ball my hands into fists beneath the table.

"Of course not."

The unutterable name scratches at my voice.

Though I want to admonish Mio's familiarity, telling her not to use "Shiori-chan" would only prompt her to question why. As a mere roommate to Miyagi, I don't have a reason convincing enough to satisfy Mio. Therefore, I remain silent.

It's undoubtedly better to stay quiet than to get grilled by Mio with "why" and "how come."

"Shiori-chan looks like she's in a bad mood though?"

I close off my ears to block out the unwanted name. How one refers to someone shouldn't be that significant. After all, closeness and distance are not solely measured by names.

I neither call Miyagi "Shiori" nor "Shiori-chan," yet we live together, share kisses, and have engaged in countless more intimate acts. Our relationship is undoubtedly deeper than Mio's. There's no comparison. I know that.

Thus, there's no need for measurement. Being her roommate is good enough.

"She just looks that way. She was actually having fun. There should be pictures where she looks more cheerful."

Miyagi wasn't visibly cheerful that day, yet she was unusually animated for her standards. Mio might not understand, but those sides of Miyagi are captured in my phone.

Or so I thought, until after we returned from the zoo and I went back through the photos, feeling the disparity between that image and reality. She doesn't appear nearly as entertained as I'd imagined.

I've been pretending it's my imagination all along, but now I'm not so sure.

When I look at the phone Mio holds, a face not exactly cheerful nor grumpy glows on the screen.

Miyagi behaved a bit strangely that day, asking me over and over about my favorite animals as well as ones I want to see again. It wasn't like her usual self, and perhaps she harbored some dissatisfaction towards me.

Why dissatisfaction?

I have no idea. If someone said it's all in my head, it might just be that.

"Ah, well, there are a few where she looks kind of happy, I guess... But still, aren't there too many of Shiori-chan's pictures?"

Mio's voice at my side pulls me out from the depths of my thoughts. With a smile, I cover up the insecurities born during the winter break. Smile, and your feelings will align. Laugh, and the unease fades away.

"Really? Isn't that about normal for a zoo visit?"

Responding brightly makes Mio look at me as though she's discovered a rare species.

"Don't you usually also take pictures of the animals?"
"There are some. Penguins, polar bears, and such."

Stored on my phone, there are indeed photos beyond those of Miyagi.

"There are, but don't you think the count is a bit off? Oh, what's this? Hab... Habsirocco or something?"
"Hokobiroko."

I correct Mio’s muttering mistakes as she looks at the photos.

"Ah, that’s it. But isn’t there too many pictures of the Shoebill? You like them?"
"I didn’t even know they existed."
"I suspected as much since I’ve never heard you mention Shoebills. So, why so many pictures?"
"I grew fond of them."

The Shoebill, cherished by Miyagi, became something I came to like as well. There are numerous things I’ve grown fond of, things I had no interest in before.

Miyagi encourages me to declare a fondness for various things. I sense she’ll continue expanding the list of things I like. However, questions like those I faced at the zoo trouble me.

Favorite animals or the ones I want to see again.

Providing a satisfactory answer to Miyagi seems elusive. Besides, I don't even know why she wants to know such things.

Why. Why does she feel the need to ask?

"That makes no sense at all."

Mio echoes my sentiments in words, adding, "Hazuki, you don't seem the type to be interested in animals like Shoebills, do you?"

"That's not true. Also, picture time is over."

I snatch my phone back from Mio. Miyagi's incomprehensible actions aren't something that should concern me. After all, she's inherently mysterious and often does things that are unreasonable. It's not unusual for her to do things I can't grasp.

Probably, or perhaps for sure, that's just how it is. More importantly, I just want to see Miyagi soon.

Being with her is all that matters. I have so many things I desire from her, but the most crucial one is simply being together. As long as that's fulfilled, I can overlook everything else.

"Oh, Hazuki, are you free today?"

As I tuck my phone back into my bag, Mio's chirpy voice addresses me.

"I was planning to head home early," I reply.

"Aw, that's cold. You didn't hang out with me during the break either."

"But we saw each other at work."

"True, but can't you keep me company for once?"

"As long as it doesn't get too late, it's fine."

I'm not keen on detours, but I don't want to sever ties with Mio either, so some compromise is necessary.

"Is there someplace you want to go, Hazuki?"

"Anywhere you want to go is fine."

"Once in a while, let me tag along to where you want to go."

“Honestly, I don't have any place in mind right now.”

"You always say that, don't you, Hazuki? Well, that's okay. Oh, then, how about I come over to your place? I'd love to meet Shiori-chan too."

Mio's cheerful demeanor seems devoid of any ulterior motives. She genuinely wants to meet Miyagi, it seems, but it's not a very exciting conversation for me.

"My room's a mess, and Miyagi will be home late, so maybe another time?"

My room isn't messy, and Miyagi won't be home late. While I'd prefer not to lie, I'd rather avoid having Mio over, so I feel it can't be helped.

"Alright then, invite me over once you've tidied up. Preferably when Shiori-chan is around too."

"I'll try to get it cleaned up soon."

I respond with a vague smile to Mio's teasing grin, and with that, the lecture begins.

Today is shaping up to be a long day.

I sit through what feels like an endless lecture, grab some lunch, and then attend my afternoon classes. Once my university tasks are complete, I accompany Mio on her shopping errands. I text Miyagi to let her know I'll be home late, and have dinner with Mio. She suggests we catch a live concert together sometime, but I gently decline and head home.

"Sorry I'm late."

I call out to Miyagi, who's washing dishes in the shared space.

"It's fine," she says plainly.

"Have you eaten dinner?"

"Yes."

Her curt tone is unchanged from usual. Miyagi never hides her unreasonable displeasure. I long to see a happy Miyagi, but not the one incessantly asking questions I can't answer. Miyagi being preoccupied with me isn't her usual self.

"I see. So what are you going to do now?"

".... Touch."

"Touch what?"

"Sendai-san."

I don't understand. A flurry of question marks dance in my head as Miyagi finishes with the dishes and approaches me. Then, without warning, she places her hand softly on my chest.

"Uh, what's with this hand?"

There's no hint of impropriety. Her hand remains still, resting gently over my clothes.

"Is it bothering you?"

"It's just surprising, that's all."

".... Is there anything you dislike me doing to you?"

Miyagi asks something I hadn't expected. This is not a very good Miyagi.

"Not really."

To prevent Miyagi from saying anything that might make me uncomfortable, I lean in and kiss her before she can say anything else.

The Usual Miyagi (II)

Part 248

Our joined lips gave birth to silence.

Miyagi's hand clutched my clothes, covering my chest. While we kissed, she couldn't speak, even if she wanted to ask me something. I was able to keep this different side of Miyagi contained within her.

I hoped the silence would continue indefinitely.

Even though the kiss was to silence her, I longed to feel her more deeply. I gently tapped her lips with the tip of my tongue. Yet, she showed no intention of letting me in and kept her lips tightly shut. Instead, she stepped on my foot, firmly enough that it felt mildly painful.

It pleased me to have Miyagi step on my foot.

The feeling seemed perverse, but it was better than being asked questions I couldn't answer while we kissed. The heat transmitted from our lips wasn’t enough, so I pressed my tongue against her lips more insistently. In response, Miyagi pushed me away forcefully.

"Sendai-san, you're acting strange. Why are you doing that now?"

"Isn't it weird that Miyagi suddenly started touching my chest?"

"I said I was going to."

"If saying it makes it acceptable, I'll say it too. I'm going to kiss you again."

Following Miyagi's rules, I declared my intention before drawing near again.

I cut off Miyagi’s complaint with a kiss and wrapped my arms around her waist. Her lips remained stubbornly closed. I lightly bit them, which resulted in an even stronger stomp on my foot, causing me to step back.

"You're not allowed to speak," came her displeased voice.

"It’s fine not speaking, isn’t it?"

"...Sit down here, Sendai-san."

Miyagi pointed at the chair I usually sit on, commanding me like I was some kind of pet. But I had no obligation to follow her orders. Right now, she had no right to command me, and even if she got upset because I didn’t comply, Miyagi is usually in a bad mood occasionally, so it hardly matters.

Yet, the Miyagi in front of me now was not a good Miyagi.

If I continued silencing her with kisses, I might end up provoking anger to an irreparable level, so I quietly sat as I was told and heard her say, “Don’t get up.”

"Is there honestly nothing that you wouldn't like if I did it to you?"

Her disgruntled voice lingered in my ears.

"No, there isn't."

"Why not?"

"Even if you ask why..."

"Say something."

"...Being told not to work part-time would be troublesome, but that's something to be told, not something done."

"Right. Tell me something you'd dislike if it was done to you."

Even if she asked, nothing came to mind—not from Miyagi, at least. There were things I'd dislike being done to by others, but nothing I couldn't tolerate from Miyagi. There were certainly things I'd prefer not to experience, but even those I could accept.

"More importantly, I just want to kiss properly."

As I couldn’t provide an answer satisfying enough for Miyagi, I had

no choice but to divert.

Of course, I wasn't lying about wanting to kiss Miyagi.

"...If you can't tell me something you'd dislike being done, then you can do it if tell me something you like or don't like. If you can't say any of those, then you can just go to your room now."

"It's not a big deal, is it? I'm not going to say I hate Miyagi's favorites, and I won't force you to like what you don't."

"That's not the point."

"If it's not, then what is? What do you want from me, Miyagi?"

I didn't know. Miyagi's questions were far too complex for me.

Considering what happened at the zoo, the answer "My likes and dislikes are the same as Miyagi's" wasn't acceptable. It might be correct from my perspective, but Miyagi would probably not agree, and she'd know if I gave a false answer. Thus, I couldn't find a suitable answer to give.

"I just want you to tell me the truth."

"I suppose kissing is what I like."

I wanted to kiss. Sharing body heat seemed preferable to exchanging words right now. I felt it would bring me closer to understanding Miyagi.

"Sendai-san, you always say things like that."

Miyagi's brow furrowed. It seemed a kiss was out of the question, and I lowered my gaze.

Something, something, something. I needed an answer that satisfied Miyagi.

Glaring at the floor, pressing my temples with frustration, I filled the looming silence with a hesitant murmur.

"...Cheesecake."

"Cheesecake?"

"Yeah. I like cheesecake, so let's have some together."

I added nonchalantly and looked up.

Whether it was rare or baked cheesecake, I didn't care. Sharing one with Miyagi seemed like it would create happy moments.

"And I'm fond of Miyagi, just like Mike-chan."

In terms of people I liked, it was Miyagi. But I lacked the courage to confess words that might cost me everything, so I used Mike-chan as a pretext to convey one percent of my true feelings.

"You don't need to joke like that."

I knew it. It had to be this way.

I mustn't make Miyagi leave by confessing my true feelings.

"If you're satisfied, can we kiss?"

"Is cheesecake your absolute favorite?"

"Absolute favorite? If you put it that way..."

I wasn't sure.

It was undeniably something I liked, but I'd never assigned it a rank. More importantly, I wanted to know what Miyagi's top choice was, though I understood now wasn't the time to ask.

"The question wasn't about my absolute favorite, just about things I like or dislike, right? Isn't whether it's the top priority less important?"

There was no need to force a ranking.

Putting the derailed conversation back on track, I prepared to stand for our agreed reward of a kiss when Miyagi muttered softly.

"...Sendai-san, my lip balm..."

"Is it coming off?"

"Not that. My lip balm is completely gone."

With her usual disgruntled expression, she softly kicked my leg.

The atmosphere hadn't exactly changed, but I was relieved that the side of Miyagi who had interrogated me like a detective on a TV drama had temporarily vanished.

"In that case, I'll choose one for you, so let's go buy it."

I smiled brightly to keep the difficult Miyagi from reemerging.

"I didn't ask for that. Just go buy it. I'll give you the money."

"Let's go together."

"Just pick one you like, and get it for me."

"Would you like the same one as before?"

Standing up, I reached for Miyagi.

I brushed my fingers over her bare lips and kissed her cheek. Caressing her plumeria earring, I touched the corner of her mouth with my lips. Gently overlapping our lips, I transferred my warmth.

I wished to color Miyagi's lips with my hue rather than lip balm. I wanted to merge my identity with the things I loved.

But Miyagi wouldn't allow a lingering kiss. She soon pushed my shoulder with a displeased remark.

"We're talking about lip balm, right? Whether it's the same as last time or different, just buy it."

"How about using the same one I'm using?"

"Anything but what Sendai-san is using."

She spoke in a low voice and pushed me away. Although Miyagi's response was dull, if she had asked me to buy the same one, I'd have questioned her sanity, so a boring answer was just right.

"Got it. Is it okay if I pick one I like?"

"Yeah, it's fine."

"Then I'll choose something cute for you."

"Do you have a favorite lip balm?"

Typically, Miyagi would probably grumble about not wanting something cute, but with a detached voice, she watched me intently.

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said."

"I have a favorite lip balm. I think it's fun to choose one for someone."

As I reached for Miyagi's lips, she swatted my hand away with the back of hers.

Chapter 85

Sendai-san Doesn't Resist (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 249

"Where was that delicious cake shop that Asakura-san mentioned the other day?"

I ask Maika, sitting next to me, as I pack away my pencil case.

"Are you going to buy cake?"
"Yes."

The lecturer is no longer in the lecture hall. We've attended all the lectures we were supposed to today, so Maika and I only have to head home. But I'm not in a rush to get back. Today is one of those days when Sendai-san will be late coming home from her part-time job.

I wish the student she's tutoring would pass their high school entrance exam soon, so she wouldn't need to work as a tutor anymore.

"Did something good happen?"

Maika says in an upbeat voice.

"Not really, I just felt like having something sweet."
"Sweet things, huh?"

Though the lecture hall should be noisy without the lecturer around, Maika's voice rings particularly loud in my ears.

A thank-you to Sendai-san for getting me the lip balm.

That's part of it, but I also genuinely want something sweet. The words I said to Maika are true, so I just need to be my usual self. I know that, but still, I feel a tingling down my spine.

"Can I come with you? I feel like having some cake too, and I remember the place so I can show you the way. Oh, and I want to stop by the bookstore."

I respond with a simple "Sure" to Maika's cheerful voice, and we leave the lecture hall together. Complaining about the upcoming exams, we head to the first destination, the bookstore.

"It's cold. What's up with this wind?"

Not even five minutes after leaving the university, Maika complains about the headwind, shoving her hands into her coat pockets. Meanwhile, she notices me minimizing my exposure to the biting wind with a scarf and gloves and murmurs, "I should get a scarf."

"It's warm."

I tightly grasp the scarf—which I told Maika I bought myself. It's indispensable, shielding me from both the morning's biting wind and the strong gusts of the evening.

"I bet it is. Looks like you're prepared for the cold. Ah, I can't wait for spring break. It's freezing outside; I just want to laze around at home."
"Maika, you're not going home for spring break, right?"
"Yeah, I'll be around. Wanna hang out?"
"Didn't you just say you wanted to laze around at home?"
"Hanging out and lounging are different. Let's invite Sendai-san and go somewhere."

Hearing Maika mention a name she shouldn't mix into the conversation, it doesn't feel right to just say "sounds good." But I can't say "no" either, so I reply casually with an "okay."

"By the way, did you go to the zoo with Sendai-san?"

Where we'll go during spring break.

Grateful that the conversation didn't head in that direction, I share the fact.

"We saw a shoebill."
"Oh, cute. I want to see it too."

"How about we go together next time?"
"Sounds good."

Maika effortlessly says the "sounds good" that I couldn't utter earlier.

Sendai-san burdens my words.

But unlike in high school, it’s different now. Back then, the five thousand yen between us was a weight. We would not tell anyone about what happened after school. That kind of rule weighed on me, and I didn't talk about anything related to her.

Now as a university student, there are no such rules.
Maika knows that Sendai-san and I live together.

If I wanted to, I could say anything. Yet, there are so many things I can’t say. Nor do I want to. I want to keep everything about Sendai-san as my own secret, just for me.

I know it doesn’t make me a very good person.

"Maika, what do you want to see at the zoo?"

I try to blow away thoughts of Sendai-san from my mind by speaking brightly.

"Uh, let’s see... the shoebill, and maybe tigers or lions?"
"Tigers and lions, that sounds pretty ordinary."
"Clichés are the best."
"So, what’s your favorite animal?"
"Hmm, maybe squirrels. I used to have one."

After a moment of contemplation, Maika confidently answers my question.

Unlike Sendai-san.

She has a favorite animal and can answer without hesitation. It's nothing extraordinary. Anyone, even Maika, can answer such a question. It's not supposed to be difficult. Anyone can say what they like.

The strange one is—

As I pull on the end of my scarf, I push the image of Sendai-san, who came back to my mind uninvited, to the corner and force my feet to keep moving.

We enter the bookstore, where Maika buys two manga volumes. Taking the opportunity, I also purchase one manga and one novel before we head out for cakes.

"This should be the place Asakura-san mentioned."

In front of a store that looks more like it sells jewels than cakes, Maika speaks and steps inside. I follow, thinking that if I had been alone, I would have turned around and left. The store's chic exterior and interior make me hesitant to enter.

I'm thankful Maika is with me as I gaze at the cake display, filled with desserts resembling jewels.

"Everything looks delicious. I can't decide."

Maika's excited voice reaches me.
Indeed, every cake looks delectable, and while the choice is tough, I am set on buying two rare cheesecakes.

"Shiori, what are you buying?"
"Cheesecake... Oh, Maika, what kind of cake do you think someone who likes cheesecake wouldn't like?"
"What's with that complicated scenario? Couldn't you just ask what kind of cake someone who likes cheesecake would like?"
"That works too."

It's not that I want to spite Sendai-san.
I just hope she'll enjoy something delicious, and even if it's not her favorite, a rare cheesecake should be something she likes.

Yet a foolish part of me wonders if presenting her with something she dislikes might coax her into confessing something she truly enjoys.

"Instead of guessing, why don't you just ask her what cakes she likes? That'd be faster than avoiding the ones she might dislike."
"Ask her directly?"
"You mean Sendai-san. ...Isn't that who you're talking about?"
"…Yes, but still."

Even if it is true, asking her won't yield much.

Sendai-san claims to like everything. When I once asked if she liked rare or baked cheesecake more, she had said both. She doesn't divulge her true preferences.

"Two rare cheesecakes and two shortcakes," I decide, skipping the pointless step of asking her.

"Then I'll get a fruit tart and a lemon pie."

Maika buys two.
I get four.
We buy the cakes and leave the overly chic store. Though Sendai-san likely hasn't returned home yet, I part ways with Maika and head back.

I get on the train, walk along the path where Sendai-san's favorite cat, Mike-chan, often appears, and arrive at an empty home. After putting the cakes in the refrigerator, I quickly finish a meal and start working on my report in my room when there's a knock on the door.

"You can come in."

I spoke a bit louder, and the door immediately opened, revealing Sendai-san entering the room.

"I'm home."
"Welcome back. There's cake in the fridge, so feel free to have some."
"That's unusual for you to buy cake, Miyagi. What's up?"
"Nothing really. I just felt like having something sweet."
"Have you already had some?"
"Not yet."
"Then let me brew some tea, and we can have it together."

Sendai-san said with a cheerful smile.

"Sure, but have you had dinner?"
"I ate before heading to my part-time job."
"Alright, let's have cake together then."

I followed Sendai-san to the common area. As announced, she began

preparing tea, filling the white electric kettle with water and switching it on.

"Where did you get the cake from?"
"Check the fridge."

Following my suggestion, Sendai-san opened the refrigerator.

"Oh, this place. I've heard it's quite a reputable shop."
"Have you been there before?"
"No, but Mio mentioned they were delicious, so I was thinking of buying some after exams."

I don't dislike Komatsu-san, but she's not someone I find agreeable. Knowing that someone with whom I don't enjoy agreeing with recommended this shop to Sendai-san dampens my mood.

Still, I'm pleased that I could buy a cake from a place she was interested in, as a thank-you to Sendai-san.

That's how I should feel, yet my emotions refuse to align as I wish.

"What did Komatsu-san say she tried?"

Sendai-san, now closing the fridge and taking out mugs and plates, responds to my question.

"Shortcake and Mont Blanc, I think."
"...Sendai-san, after we have the cake, I'll give you an order."
"An order? You mean from New Year's?"

The morning after we slept in Sendai-san's bed, we made a promise: if I stayed by her side, she would obey my order. That promise remains unfulfilled.

"Yes."

I answered briefly, touching my earring shaped like a flower.

Sendai-san Doesn't Resist (II)

Part 250

The cake is delicious.
Sendai-san seems to be savoring it as well.
Asakura-san's and Komatsu-san's recommendations were spot on.
The reviews were accurate, and going out of our way to buy it was worth it.

"Do you want a bite?"

Sendai-san, sitting opposite me, asks while slicing her rare cheesecake with a fork.

"We're eating the same thing, so I'm good."
"You've been staring over here, so I thought you wanted some."
"It just looks that way because you're right in front of me."

When eating cake in the shared space, there's not much to look at except the cake or the person sitting across. There's nothing else to see.

I take a bite of my rare cheesecake and sip my tea. Sendai-san's tea is always delicious.

The sweet cake pairs perfectly with the unsweetened tea, allowing me to keep eating even though we just had dinner. The refreshing tea accentuates the cheesecake's sweetness and subtle tang. When I glance at Sendai-san, two-thirds of her cheesecake has vanished.

"This cake is really good. Let's eat together again sometime. If there's any cake you want, just let me know and I'll get it for you."

With that, she takes a big bite of her cheesecake.

"Were the cheesecake and shortcake good, Sendai-san?"

I respond to her question with another question.

"I like both, so yeah, the cheesecake and shortcake were good."

“But there was also Mont Blanc.”
“Do you like Mont Blanc, Miyagi?”
“Not particularly.”
“If you liked Mont Blanc, I thought I’d buy it for you, but since you don’t, let’s choose another cake. Like I asked earlier, what would you like?”

“Something other than cheesecake and shortcake.”
“Got it. I’ll find something that looks delicious.”

Sendai-san smiles warmly and finishes off the remaining cheesecake. After eating half of her shortcake, she looks up.

“Miyagi, do you already have an order planned?”
“Why?”
“You seemed to have said it on a whim.”
“It’s not a whim.”

Though her assumption isn’t wrong, I deny it for now. I eat my cheesecake and glance at Sendai-san.

I must give an order.

Yet, I haven’t decided on what to order. If I’m going to issue an order, I want it to be something she might dislike or find challenging, but finding such an order isn’t easy.

Sendai-san doesn’t mind if her chest is touched.
I’ve tried it multiple times and know this.
No matter which part I touch, she likely wouldn’t mind, nor would she resist if I ordered her to let me leave a mark anywhere visible. Finding something she would dislike or find uncomfortable is very challenging.

Even so, there is one thing she might dislike. But it’s not a very good order—it’s something better left unsaid.

I sip my tea and finish off the rest of my cheesecake. After taking a bite of the shortcake, I ask Sendai-san a question.

“What’s your favorite color?”
“My favorite color?”
“Yes.”

I'm hesitating whether to voice the order lurking in my mind.
Thus, I make a small wager.
If Sendai-san gives me an answer I find satisfactory, I'll switch to a more banal order and let it end there.

"Well…"

Sendai-san quietly speaks, looking at me. Then, she takes a sip of tea, placing it slowly back on the table.

"Blue, perhaps."

Her voice sounds emotionless to me, yet perhaps it's just my perception. The scarf she gave me was blue. I could reason that she bought a blue scarf because it's her favorite color to gift to me.

"Is it really your favorite?"
"Yes, it is. Since I got these earrings, I've started to think blue is nice."

Touching the blue earrings I gave her, she tacked on this explanation like an excuse, which significantly lowers the credibility of her claim that blue is her favorite color.

"What was your favorite color before blue?"
"Hmm, red or yellow?"
"That's just a traffic light."

Hearing that, the option of switching to a safe order disappears. It's not my fault—it's because she didn't give serious answers.

I finish the cake on my plate and drink up the rest of the tea.

"Sendai-san, leave the cleaning for later and go to your room."

She has no more cake on her plate, and her mug is empty.

"Is that the order?"
"I'll give the order once we're in your room."
"Alright."

We leave the table with the plates and mugs on it and head to Sendai-san's room.

“Sit on the bed.”

I instruct her, and she obediently complies in the room with the air conditioner on.

“I'm seated. What’s next?”

Sitting on the bed, she looks up at me as I stand up.
In the still-cold room, I bite my lip.

An excessive order.

The order I'm about to give fits that description, and though I think it would be better to return to my own room without saying it, I can’t back out now.
It’s all Sendai-san’s fault.

“…Show me what it's like when you’re doing it alone.”
“What do you mean by ‘doing it alone’?”

Sendai-san speaks in a voice neither soft nor loud.
But I remember.

It feels better than doing it by myself.

When I touched her, she once said something along those lines. I asked if she’d done it herself since then and what she thought about while doing it. So, she should know exactly what I mean by my order.

“Drop the act.”
“What act?”
“Pretending not to understand.”
“…You know, Miyagi, you call me an erotic demon, but you’re the real erotic demon here.”

She says resignedly, giving my leg a small kick.

“And what if I am? Just follow the order.”

The order is my right, and Sendai-san must follow it. It’s part of the deal, so I assertively remind her.

“Miyagi.”

Sendai-san softly calls my name and stands up. She lightly pulls on my earlobe and then kisses the earring.

“I’ll keep my promise, so take responsibility for what you’re ordering. Tell me what you want me to do and where.”

It’s always like this.
Sendai-san throws everything back to me, making me decide. Because of this, I end up feeling like I’m being ordered, even though I’m the one giving orders.

“…Then, do it on the bed.”

Though it frustrates me, I won’t abandon the order and designate the location as instructed.

“Should I just sit and do it? What about the clothes? Should they stay on, or should I take them off?”

Bombarded with questions, I tightly clench my hands into fists.

“Do it like you usually do.”
“I don’t remember—Miyagi, give me instructions.”
“That's a lie. Of course, you remember.”
“Even if you say that, I truly don’t remember. So, just tell me what to do. How should I do it on the bed?”
“…Do I have to dictate every little thing?”

“I already told you earlier. You need to take responsibility and tell me what to do. I’ll do exactly as you say, so order me.”

I let out a small sigh before pulling back the sheets and blanket on the bed.

"Lie down here and do it. You don’t have to take your clothes off."
"And the lights?"
"Keep them on."
"You're such a perv, Miyagi."
"You're the one who said to give directions, Sendai-san."
"True, but now it seems like you really want to watch."

In a lighthearted tone, Sendai-san remarks and sits on the bed. Then she looks up at me and asks, "...Are you really keeping the lights on

for this?"

"If it bothers you, cover yourself with the blanket."
"But then you won't be able to see, is that okay?"
"Sendai-san, do you want to show me or not? Which is it?"
"It’s not something you usually show others... Honestly, it’s embarrassing, and I’d rather not do it."

"Then why are you doing it?"
"...Because it was your order, Miyagi."

Sendai-san doesn’t refuse.
I knew that when I issued the order.

She’d do things others wouldn’t, even follow orders she’d find undesirable. Like back in high school, she'd follow orders without showing displeasure. I don’t wish to return to those days, though.

I want to see Sendai-san who obeys me, yet I also want to see the authentic Sendai-san who doesn’t.

Nothing goes smoothly when it comes to her, as I'm tangled in conflicting feelings. I can never stop myself from saying or doing trivial things.

"Hey Miyagi, I’ll do it properly, so give me a kiss."

Her words raise my temperature.
The not-yet-warm room feels unbearably hot, and I let out a thin breath. Sendai-san pulls my hand, almost enticingly.

And so, I can't control myself.

I lean in closer to her sitting on the bed. After gently kissing her lips, I slowly pull away, only to have my hand firmly tugged. Her lips, which I'd just kissed, then touch my fingertips, pressing softly.

"With both of us here, wouldn’t it be better to do it together?—Miyagi, you do it."

She speaks quietly, pressing a kiss on my fingertips again. Her tongue lightly flicks out, gliding over the top of my knuckle towards the back of my hand. The warmth from her touch with her lips and tongue sends a shiver down my spine.

"...Miyagi, use this hand to touch me. Or let me touch you."

I hear her soft voice, followed by another kiss on my hand. When I lightly tug on her hair, her lips break away, biting my fingertip with the same force I used to pull.

"That's enough."

I pull my fingers from her mouth, pushing a penguin toy that was sprawled on the bed into her arms.

"But I haven’t done anything yet."

Holding the penguin, Sendai-san speaks in a serious tone.

"I know, but that’s enough."
"Really, are you sure? What about the order to do it alone?"
"We’re done here."
"—Then how about doing it together?"

Sendai-san pulls at my hand once more.

"...No."

I push her away as she attempts to kiss my fingertips again and sit on the floor. Grabbing a tissue from the platypus’s back, I wipe my damp hands.

Sendai-san Doesn't Resist (III)

Part 251

"Show me when you do it by yourself."

If I had continued to order her like that, Sendai-san might have actually done it. But if she truly did it in front of me, it would cause trouble.

Honestly, I didn't really want to see her doing it.

What I desired from Sendai-san was for her to resist, say no, or look troubled saying she can't do it. When she agrees so readily to do it alone, I don't know what to do with myself.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san softly calls my name while holding onto a stuffed penguin.

I've already used up the "right to order Sendai-san" that I acquired on New Year's, so I have no reason to stay in this room any longer. I should return to my own room. If I stay here, I'll probably say unnecessary things or end up hearing something I shouldn't. Even though I know this, I can't bring myself to move.

On the bed, the plush penguin flaps its wings. To be precise, it's Sendai-san moving the penguin's arms—no, wings—back and forth.

"Are you really not going to do it?"

When I answer "I'm not" to the voice that descends from the bed, the penguin is thrown my way, and I hastily catch it.

"Hey, that's dangerous."

I place the penguin next to the platypus and voice my complaints, but there's no response. Instead, she quietly climbs down from the bed and sits next to me without a word, laying her hand over mine as though it were the most natural thing in the world, bringing her

face closer. I press against her shoulder.

"Sendai-san, I don't like this."

"A little kiss is fine, isn't it?"

"No, it's not. You'll definitely try something weird."

I brush off the hand that comes to touch my neck and glare at Sendai-san.

"Miyagi made the weird order first."

"Even if it was a weird order, I did say you didn’t have to do it anymore, so it's over with that."

"You said something that sounded like an invitation, and that's why it turned out like this."

"I wasn't inviting you. I was merely giving an order."

"Even if that's how Miyagi sees it, I don't feel the same way."

Her voice, full of unmasked dissatisfaction, follows as Sendai-san's fingertips brush against my lips, slowly stroking. Her fingers trace my lips as if checking whether I'm using the new lip balm she chose. I bite down hard on her fingers.

"Ouch."

"It hurt because you did something strange."

I release the bitten finger and give Sendai-san a light smack with the penguin.

"Honestly, Miyagi, you're cruel. You leave kiss marks, issue strange orders, and then stop halfway, tossing me aside immediately. You should take responsibility once in a while."

"What do you mean by take responsibility?"

"Let's make a new promise."

I hear Sendai-san's voice close to my ear. The warmth of her breath

tickles, and I clench my hand tightly.

I quickly understood what she was referring to. So, my mind drifts to Christmas.

The day when we went out together, had a meal, and won a penguin from the crane game.—I kept the promise I made with Sendai-san.

That was a day when Sendai-san felt especially close, a memory both pleasing and floating. It wasn't something I wanted to forget, but I buried it deliberately as something not to be actively recalled.

It's not good. It’s not good to keep making such promises multiple times.

"...No."

As I quietly reply, a pre-prepared question is thrown my way.

"Then, if we don’t have to make promises, tell me. Miyagi, did you dream a lot about me on that bed? Do you ever do it alone or feel like doing it?"

"That's ridiculous. I have the right to order, not Sendai-san."

"But the order time is over, isn't it?"

"Even if it's over, Sendai-san doesn't have the right to ask such questions."

"So not saying means you do?"

Sendai-san speaks in a way she usually never does. It's not the broken reasoning I wanted to see in her.

"No, I don't, and I don’t feel like it. Unlike you, Sendai-san. I’m heading back to my room, so please let go."

I'll escape from here before her reasoning truly shatters. But before I can stand, she seizes my arm.

"Do the same as me. When you go back to your room, do it yourself, and in the morning, tell me how it goes."

"Sendai-san, you're a pervert."

"Come on, just tell me."

"In that case, will you tell me too? When I'm gone, will you do it here alone?"

"...Do you seriously want to know that?"

This was something hard to understand. Her unusually serious tone makes me realize I'm treading on forbidden ground, prompting me to shake off Sendai-san's hand.

"Please, just move a bit further away. This isn't the kind of conversation I wanted to have."

"So, what kind of conversation do you want?"

Her voice isn't gentle, nor is it angry. It's flat, matter-of-fact, making my chest ache slightly.

"...Sendai-san, sit over there."

I point to the other side of the table.

"Why? If we have something to talk about, let's do it here."

It seems she has no intention of moving. In that case, I'll be the one to move. Announcing, "I'll sit over there," I make my way along with the platypus with tissues, sitting on the opposite side. I line up the three cat chopstick rests sitting on the table's edge facing Sendai-san.

"Which one do you like? Answer seriously."

White cat, tabby, tuxedo. The three cats stare at Sendai-san.

"What about Miyagi?"

Holding the penguin that was on the floor, she asks the question I expected, and I answer, "The black cat," which isn't here.

"Isn't that cheating? If that's allowed, I'll choose the calico cat."

"It's really Mike-chan you like."

"Does Miyagi dislike Mike-chan?"

"Not really."

I neither like nor dislike calico cats. They're only remembered as a cat Sendai-san likes.

"So, Miyagi, what's this game?"

"It's not a game. It's a question... Did you dislike that order?"

"I don't mind being ordered by Miyagi."

"Even those kinds of orders?"

"Any kind of order."

Sendai-san is strange. Something's off. But I've always been watching this kind of Sendai-san, and life with her has become indispensable. And I want to know the Sendai-san she doesn't show, despite her eccentricity.

The Sendai-san visible to my eyes alone won't reveal her true self. I want to fill in the missing parts, to expand my exclusive Sendai-san. Even if Sendai-san becomes more eccentric or goes a bit off the rails, I want the Sendai-san that she doesn't show.

I clutch the small hand of the platypus tightly.

"Sendai-san."

"What?"

"...At the zoo, the shoebill was incredibly cute. It was cold, but I'm glad we went."

"Why bring this up suddenly?"

"Because I promised to share fun moments before. And I think I'm keeping my promise to have silly conversations, too. So if you truly dislike something, say you dislike it clearly."

I blurt out everything that needs to be said, and I release the platypus's hand.

"So, you're saying if there's ever an order I absolutely don't want to do, I should say it?"

"Not just orders. If there's something you dislike when you're with me, say it. Also, tell me what you truly like. You're not allowed to say it's the same as mine."

"What's that about? What's the point of this?"

In a probing voice, Sendai-san stacks the tuxedo cat on top of the tabby cat chopstick rest.

"I just want to get to know you better," I say.

"Why the sudden interest in getting to know me?"

The white cat is placed on top of the tuxedo cat, forming a tower of chopstick rests that soon collapses. The cats are stacked and unstacked again, rearranged on the table, and Sendai-san silently looks at me, urging me to speak.

"...Because I'm curious," I mutter, only to hear an astonished "Eh?" in response.

"—Miyagi, do you have a fever or something?"

"No fever. Is it wrong to be interested in you? We live together, and asking about things like your likes and dislikes is normal. So, if I ask, you should answer properly."

She offers no reply. The room is quiet, almost as if you could hear the movement of the air. Sendai-san continues to silently gaze at the chopstick rest cats.

I pull two tissues from the platypus, crumple them up, and toss them across the table. The small white ball hits Sendai-san softly on the head and falls to the floor.

"...I'll try to satisfy you as best I can," she says, perhaps prompted by the tissue, in a mumbling voice that lacks clarity.

"Isn't that a strange answer?" I ask.

"Well, there's really nothing unpleasant about being with you. And it's true that I like the same things as you."

"Then, create things you like and dislike."

"Even if you say to create them... Oh! There is something I dislike."

"What is it?"

"I don't want you to tell me to 'stay away'."

"Why not?"

"Because it's more fun being close."

"You always lie, Sendai-san."

"It's not a lie. Can I come closer?"

Without waiting for a response to her gentle voice, Sendai-san moves closer of her own accord. She sits next to me and kisses my earring.

Chapter 86

Miyagi's Words Are Difficult (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 252

I wanted Miyagi to take an interest in me. That's why, her words, "I'm interested," should have made me happy, but I couldn't shake off the murky feeling inside. I knew why.

Things I like and things I dislike.

These two things Miyagi made me come up with were making me feel gloomy. Even though exams were over and spring break was starting tomorrow, I couldn't get them out of my head and kept thinking about "things I like" and "things I dislike." But I still hadn't found an answer. I couldn't come up with anything likeable or unpleasant that I felt I needed to tell Miyagi.

My feet naturally grew heavier as I walked towards home. I let out a small sigh and looked around. Around this time on the way home from university, I should see it. I stopped and searched for the calico cat, and soon heard a high-pitched meow.

"Come here, Mike-chan."

At the call of the name I had given it, the calico cat trotted over and flopped down in front of me. On the dim sidewalk, I squatted down and pet the friendly cat.

What I like is petting Mike-chan.

It would be nice if that were enough for Miyagi, but I knew it wouldn't resonate with her.

Even though its so cute.

Unlike Miyagi, with Mike-chan's good-natured and accommodating personality, it doesn't run away or bite no matter how much I pet it.

Even on a cold winter day like today, it appears in front of me.

I sighed once more, petting Mike-chan's back.

If we're considering "things" rather than "activities," there's one thing I like more than petting Mike-chan.

She likes the black cat chopstick rest and gave me a black cat pencil case as a Christmas gift. She smiles at penguins at the aquarium, wants to see the shoebill at the zoo, is unfriendly to me, and says difficult questions that I can't answer.

That's the Miyagi I like.

Miyagi said, "Tell me what you really like," so it shouldn't be limited to just activities. And I think it's fine if "things" become "people" as long as they fit into the category of what I like.

But surely, even if I told her, she wouldn't believe it, nor would it satisfy her. Everything about me is tied to Miyagi, and yet I have to find another answer to satisfy her.

It's too difficult.

Since Miyagi took the trouble to be interested in me, I want to create the things I like and things I dislike as she suggested, but since I've been forbidden to say "The same as Miyagi," even if I bring up something connected to her, it would be useless.

So what should I do?

I pet Mike-chan's purring throat and stood up.

"See you later, Mike-chan."

When I waved my hand lightly, the friendly Mike-chan mewed softly and wrapped around my legs.

So cute.

Miyagi is having dinner with Utsunomiya and won't be back soon, so there's no rush to return home. I'm torn between staying and petting Mike-chan longer, but worried I'd catch a cold if I linger, I decide against it. I pet Mike-chan's head once more before heading

down the road to my house.

I climbed the steps to the third floor.

Entering an empty house, I spread open a magazine in my room but couldn't concentrate. Despite it still being early, I opted for a quick meal and made a chicken soboro bowl with egg and minced chicken. After eating, I went back to my room, sat on my bed, and gazed at the cat chopstick rest on the table.

Because Miyagi thinks I like cats, she gets me cat-related things. Even though there's something I like more than cats, she never notices. There have been countless opportunities for her to realize.

But, she doesn't try to notice, and I haven't conveyed it. I've withheld saying that I like her. I probably won't say it from now on either. I don't want to say it. Yet, at times, I feel an overwhelming urge to express it.

If there ever were a perfect moment.

I've thought that, but if I keep waiting for the right moment, I know it will never come. I'm set on maintaining our current relationship and tend to overlook those perfect opportunities.

Letting out a long sigh, I lay back on the bed.

There's no way I can say I like her.

Once spoken, words can't be taken back. They're unseen entities that linger with the one who hears them. They can't be erased with an eraser, nor can they be painted over with colors. Saying I like her would remain with Miyagi, and we wouldn't be able to return to the way things were.

And.

My words wouldn't reach Miyagi as she is now. For her, my words are lighter than a shoebill's feather, not worthy of being believed. Even so, I know they have the power to sway Miyagi, who clings to me as her roommate, which is why I can't voice them.

Things I like and things I dislike.

Just as there are things I like, there are things I dislike. Being disliked by Miyagi, whom I love, is something unpleasant to me, but I can't say that, nor is it the answer Miyagi seeks. She didn't believe me when I said I didn't want to be asked to stay away, so she probably won't believe this answer either.

Miyagi's words are a curse. They torment me into creating something uncreatable.

—If this was going to happen, perhaps I should have just done it alone, without saying that I wanted to do it together.

I hugged Pen-chan, which was lying beside my pillow.

It's not something to show to others, but it would have been better let Miyagi see me doing it, than to be burdened with the impossible task of inventing likeable and unlikeable things, endlessly tormenting my mind.

I tossed Pen-chan onto the floor and tightly closed my eyes.

Miyagi hasn't come home yet. There's no lie in saying I don't mind following orders.

Gently, I let my fingers caress my neck. I traced my collarbone and touched my body over my clothes.

The image of Miyagi's face when she told me to do it alone came to mind. At the same time, I recall her hoarse voice I heard in this bed, and the warmth of her body. I lifted my shirt, letting my hand glide from my side to where it was beneath my ribs as if I was touching Miyagi, and exhaled.

I know. Repeating these acts won't satisfy me. The desire to touch Miyagi, to be touched by her, only grows stronger.

I opened my eyes and withdrew my hand from under my clothes before my desires could escalate.

"Miyagi, you idiot!"

I expelled my impotent frustration along with the complaint, and glanced at the platypus on the floor, Miyagi's favorite animal, which she frequently squeezed. As if on cue, just as my eyes met the tissue

cover, my phone chimed briefly, prompting me to sit up.

I got off the bed and retrieved my phone from my bag, unused since earlier, noting that it wasn't Miyagi but Mio who had messaged me.

"If you're free tomorrow, would you like to join me?"

Reading the unexpected words which she hadn't mentioned at university today, I replied with my usual line, sitting with the bed as my backrest.

"Sorry, I'm busy," I responded.

"At least hear me out?" she pleaded.

"Not stating your purpose upfront basically means it's something I'd want to refuse, right?" I countered.

"As expected of you, Hazuki. I was actually inviting you to a dinner party. Is it really impossible for you to make it?" Mio implored.

I simply replied, "Impossible," and then my phone rang.

"So, can I visit your place during spring break?" Mio asked immediately, with words unrelated to the previous message.

"Hey, Mio, what about the earlier topic?" I questioned.

"I gave up on that idea. But... are you considering coming to the mixer?"

"I'm not going," I insisted.

"Then let's agree I'll visit at your place. You mentioned before that your room was messy, but it's spring break, so you can clean it up as much as you want," Mio suggested.

"Even if my room is tidy, I'm still busy," I stated.

"But you can free up at least one day, right? Let's hang out. Or better yet, come with me to the mixer," she coaxed.

I didn't want either option.

I wanted to say this, but I couldn't claim being busy for the entire, fairly long spring break. It would be unreasonable to fabricate such commitments.

"We can hang out, but can we meet outside?" I offered.

If I had to choose between the two, I'd prefer spending time with Mio rather than having her over. Miyagi wouldn't like that, and I didn't want Miyagi and Mio to meet.

"Then bring Shiori-chan along," Mio proposed.

"Why?"

"I want to see her," she said with evident enjoyment.

"Miyagi seems busy, though," I replied.

I highly doubted she was actually busy, but I decided to use it as an excuse.

"Even if she's busy, everyone has at least one day off," Mio remarked.

"Even so, Miyagi is shy and more of an indoor person."

"An indoor person, you say? Then we should definitely meet at your place. Plus, I don't really mind if she's shy."

"Even if you don't mind, Miyagi might," I pointed out.

"No worries, no worries. If we meet enough times, she won't be shy anymore."

This isn't working. Mio doesn't back down in situations like this.

If there were a concrete reason, Mio wouldn't insist. But right now, I didn't have sufficient reason to dissuade her. Facing this, insisting on a weak excuse could cause friction, and having her speculate about the reasons I don't want Miyagi to meet her would be troublesome.

"Alright, well, I'll check Miyagi's schedule, but don't get your hopes up," I warned.

"Okay then, I'll be waiting with high hopes," Mio's cheerful voice resonated in my ear.

Miyagi's Words Are Difficult (II)

Part 253

Spring break is delightful.

It means more time spent with Miyagi in this house, and just lazing around in the same room makes me feel cheerful. The thought of possibly going to the aquarium or the zoo together makes it even more exhilarating.

However, thanks to a call from Mio, the first day of spring break has taken a more gloomy turn.

"Sendai-san, aren't you eating?”

The voice from across the table makes me look at Miyagi. She's watching me intently, holding toast with butter and jam in one hand.

"Huh? Oh, I am."

The simple breakfast of toast, ham and eggs in front of me hasn't been touched.

Miyagi takes a bite of her toast. Watching her, I nibble on the egg white of my sunny-side-up egg, then take a bite of butter-and-jam-covered toast.

Yesterday, I promised Mio—or rather, was made to promise—that I would tell Miyagi about meeting Mio and get her approval for it. Unless I clear this mission, my spring break will likely remain far from enjoyable.

"Miyagi, you don’t have any particular plans for spring break, right?"

I lightly poke at the soft yolk with a fork.

"I don’t want to go anywhere."
"I haven't even said anything yet."

"It seemed like you were going to suggest going out together, so I just said it."
"What about the zoo or the aquarium?"
"I'm not going. You'll be at your part-time job anyway, right?"

Her unenthusiastic answer comes back, and I poke at the yolk again, breaking it, before taking a bite of the yolk-covered ham.

"I told you, I'll be working during spring break, but not that much."

I'd mentioned this to Miyagi a few days ago, and she should have understood. But her mood isn't particularly good.

Like during winter break, I'm working at the café, but I don't plan to work so much that it consumes most of my break. The tutoring job is practically over as well. Kikyō-chan has completed her entrance exams, and the results should be in soon. If she passes, there's nothing left for me to do.

I've been asked to continue tutoring her even after her advancement, but that conversation will only happen if she passes.

"Miyagi, you don't have to go out, but could you grant me a favor?"

Ideally, I'd like to go out with her, but first, I need to tackle an even more daunting task.

"A favor?"

Even before I can explain, Miyagi furrows her brow.

The promise I made with Mio could be brushed off by saying something random, but knowing Mio, if I ignore it, she'll just plan another meet-up.

There's plenty of time that can be considered a break, including Golden Week, summer vacation, and even regular Sundays. None of these would prevent the promise from being fulfilled.

Mio's visit is likely inevitable; thus, I want to address it promptly.

"Don't make such a displeased face; at least listen, okay? So, Mio wants to come over—"

"On that day, I'll meet Maika. Once the date's decided, let me know, and I'll head out so I won't be in the way."

Miyagi interrupts, not letting me finish.

"No, that's not it. On the day Mio comes, I'd like you to be here, too."

"Why? Isn't Komatsu-san your friend?"

"She is, but she wants to meet you."

"Absolutely not."

The crease in Miyagi's brow deepens.

I'd like to furrow my brows too, but I consciously maintain a smile.

"Come on, she'll be here for just half a day. Can't you meet her?"

Contrary to the bright tone I'm using with Miyagi, a low voice inside me says, "I don't want Miyagi to meet Mio."

During spring break, Miyagi should only be meeting with me, and there's no need for her to befriend Mio. I want to accept Miyagi's reluctance to meet Mio and inform Mio right away that Miyagi won't be available.

But, if I hold back just this once, my university life will likely be more peaceful from here on out. It might not be perfect, but it'll get closer to that tranquil life. Avoiding an unnatural scenario where Miyagi doesn't meet Mio might also prevent Mio from getting suspicious and probing unnecessarily.

"I don't have anything to talk about with her, so no. Besides, what's Komatsu-san's aim in meeting me?"

"Aim? Hmm, maybe she just wants to get closer to you."

Those words feel unpleasant, making my chest churn. Mio isn't at fault, but it doesn't sit well with me.

Miyagi, who isn't mine, shouldn't be anyone else's, especially not Mio's.

Although that's unlikely to happen, the mere possibility makes my heart feel as if it’s been smeared with oil.

Miyagi shouldn’t belong to anyone—not to Mio, not to anyone else.

"It's the same as when Utsunomiya came over; just stay home. I’ll grant any of your wishes, so please?"

I down some orange juice to wash away the oily feeling accumulating inside me.

"So, I can give you orders?"

"Yes."
"Stop offering orders so cheaply, Sendai-san."
“If you'd prefer something other than orders, what would you like? Any request?”
"I have none, so just meet with Komatsu-san by yourself."
"That’s not acceptable. I’ll offer any exchange, so just keep half a day open."

As my voice hangs in the air, I hear the sound of a fork clattering lightly against a plate. It’s not loud, but it catches my attention, and I glance at Miyagi’s hands—she’s impaled a side-dish cherry tomato with her fork but lets out a small sigh without eating it.

"…Then, join me when I go out with Maika."

Her voice, neither too loud nor too soft, resonates in my ear.

"With Utsunomiya?"
"Yes. That’s the exchange. In return for meeting with Komatsu-san, go out with us anytime."

I can't outright refuse, and it’s not like I dislike the idea.

It’s just that, somehow, the thought makes my chest flutter.

This feeling is nothing more than petty jealousy on my part. There’s nothing wrong with Utsunomiya, as I understand. Also, if I accept this proposal, I’ll resolve the matter with Mio, and everything will end amicably.

"I don’t see why that has to be an exchange. I’d be fine going out."
"Let's keep it as an exchange."
"If you’re okay with it, Miyagi, then fine. So, where are we going?"

I take another bite of my toast and gaze at Miyagi.

"It hasn't been decided, but she was saying she wanted you to help pick out clothes."

Miyagi snaps up the cherry tomato as if it had wronged her.

"Want me to pick out clothes for you too, Miyagi?"
"No need."
"Why not? I’ll pick something cute. Let me!"
"I don’t need clothes or cute things."
"You seem to dislike being called cute, Miyagi—is cute not your thing?"
"My opinion isn’t important now. We’re talking about Maika."

Her irritated voice pulls the conversation back on track.

"Got it. I’ll ask Utsunomiya what kind of clothes she wants."

"Are you speaking with Maika?"

Miyagi asks as if it's a given with a low voice.

"It’s hard to choose without knowing her preferences. So, when’s a good time for you, Miyagi?"

"A good time for what?"
"You know what I mean—the day to meet Mio."

I take a bite of ham, waiting for a reply.

But Miyagi remains tight-lipped.

Even after finishing her toast and egg, she stays silent. As I prompt her with, "Miyagi, when's good for you?” she eventually mutters in a low voice.

"As late as possible."

"And when would that be? Maybe the end of February?"

"...March."

"Got it. I'll let Mio know for March. Oh, and one more thing. Keep the 'Niboshi Day' open."

"...Why do you have to call it that? Just say February 14th."

"Back in high school, you're the one who called February 14th 'Niboshi Day,' remember? Did you forget?"

It was Valentine's Day during our second year of high school. I remember distinctly when I was about to give Miyagi friendship chocolates, and she called it that.

"That's just mean."

"I don’t mind being mean, just keep it open."

Miyagi doesn’t respond.

However, she tends to voice her dislike if she doesn’t want something, so her silence likely means she doesn’t object. Thus, one plan for my spring break is now confirmed.

Miyagi's Words Are Difficult (III)

Part 254

"...Wasn't I just supposed to stay at home?"

Not even five seconds after being summoned to the shared space, Miyagi speaks in a displeased tone.

"I'm making chocolates, so help me out."
"Why?"
"Because it's February 14th."

On the kitchen counter, I laid out chocolates I bought for this day, as well as a knife and a pot for preparation.

"You mentioned being free today, but you never said to help make chocolates."
"I didn't say it, but since you're home, lend a hand."
"It's a hassle. Can't you just buy some chocolates?"
"In that case, I'm going to buy some now. Will you come with me?"
"No way."

Miyagi's voice comes as a denial, but since it's only been about an hour since we had lunch, we have plenty of time to go out.

"If you don't want to, then help out. We have ample time, and if we're not going to buy them, making them should be fine."

I expected Miyagi to dislike both options. However, giving in now would make the effort of keeping Valentine's Day open meaningless.

"Sendai-san can make them alone, there's no real reason for me to help."

Miyagi expresses her discontent and lightly kicks my leg.

"It's more fun to make them together. Plus, you can give some to Utsunomiya."

I don't want to think about giving the chocolates we make to

Utsunomiya. Truthfully, I don't want them given to anyone else either.
But if I can provide some reason for making these chocolates, I feel Miyagi might relent.

I want to make chocolates with Miyagi on Valentine's Day, and I want to eat them.

The only way is to mention Utsunomiya.

"Are you giving yours to Komatsu-san, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi looks at me with a face like she's solving a difficult problem.

"I'm not meeting Mio at the next shift, and I don't have plans to see her elsewhere either, so I'm not giving any to her."

The chocolates I first gave Miyagi when I was in high school on Valentine's Day were the "casual friend chocolates" I handed out to Umina and the others. By the second Valentine's Day, it was no longer a casual gesture.

And this third time, it's become something I wish to give only to Miyagi and receive only from her.

It's ridiculous, but even knowing Miyagi might not feel the same way, I still want to enjoy this widely celebrated yet often taken-for-granted event with her.

"I'm not planning to see Maika for a while either."
"I see. But I want to eat chocolate, so let's make some. Miyagi, do you dislike truffles?"
"Are you making truffles?"
"If you don't like them, we can choose something else."
"…Truffles are fine. How do you make them?"

Miyagi moves closer to the sink and picks up the chocolate.

"You chop that chocolate, melt it to make ganache, then coat it with cocoa powder or chocolate. First, let's chop this, so hand it over."

I accept the chocolate from Miyagi and begin to finely chop it with a knife. Halfway through dissecting about two-thirds of the amount needed, Miyagi, who had been silently observing, speaks up.

"Sendai-san, the chocolates sold in stores are made from cocoa beans, right?"
"That's true. But... are you by any chance suggesting we start from cocoa beans?"
"Not really. But if we're just melting chocolate, wouldn't it be better to eat them as they are?"
"That's not better. Since we're making truffles, get the cream from the fridge."

I couldn't let those specially bought chocolates, intended to be made into truffles, just be eaten as is. Miyagi, without complaint, fetches the cream, and I give her the next task.

"Heat the cream until it boils, then turn off the heat."

I give her the necessary amounts and heat settings, entrusting Miyagi with the cream. Soon, I hear "heat's off," and I pour the cream into the bowl of chopped chocolate and mix it with a spatula. Then, I have Miyagi strain it, and we set it in the fridge to chill.

"How long do we wait now?"

Miyagi asks, sounding bored.

"About thirty minutes, maybe?"
"Isn't that too long?"
"Then let's chill it with ice."
"Either way is fine."

Her indifferent reply leaves me pondering our next move until Miyagi takes it upon herself to start washing the pots.

"Do you like chocolates so much that you make them by hand, Sendai-san?"
"Not really, but it's Valentine's Day."
"Then do you love Valentine's Day?"
"Well, I don't know if I'd say I love it, but it's on the calendar like any holiday. Like Halloween or Christmas."
"Sendai-san, you sure love holidays."

Deciding to chill the chocolates on ice, I remove them from the fridge and place them on the counter.

The shared space is filled with the enticingly sweet aroma befitting Valentine's Day, but Miyagi's questions are less sweet. Her "do you love it?" is challenging for me, leaving me unsure if my answer is right.

Even if simply questioned about favorites, the dual notions of "disliked" and "liked," concepts that Miyagi had me think over, linger in my mind.

I drop my gaze to the lusciously melting chocolate.

"...Do you like holidays, Miyagi?"
"Not particularly interested."

After saying this, Miyagi finishes washing and disappears from in front of me.

"Where are you going?"

Without answering me, Miyagi returns with a spoon in hand. Without hesitation, she dips it into the bowl.

"Miyagi, what are you doing?"

She must have heard me, yet she scoops some chocolate and raises the spoon to her mouth.

"…Is it good?"

Knowing there’s no point in telling her to return what's in her mouth, I ask for her opinion.

"Yeah."
"Let me try, too."

I reach for the spoon Miyagi is holding, but the intended object eludes me.

"Nope. I’ve already used this one; if you want to taste, use a new spoon."
"It's just us eating, so isn't it fine?"
"No, it's not."
"Well then, maybe I’ll taste it directly."

I draw closer to Miyagi, who only ever plays it stingy.

Though she must realize I'm about to kiss her, she doesn't close her eyes as she holds the spoon. I bring my lips closer, but Miyagi's eyes stay open, so I close my eyes instead. But before our lips meet, she steps on my foot.

"I've already tasted it, so we're fine."

How boring.
Not fun at all.
Last Valentine's Day, we kissed for Miyagi's taste test. So this year, it should be my turn to taste through a kiss.

I grab the spoon from Miyagi, holding onto her arm. Then, using the back end of the spoon's handle, I scoop some chocolate and let it smear on the palm of her hand.

"Now there's chocolate on it."

A voice full of displeasure reaches me, but I don't apologize.

I lean towards her chocolate-stained palm and slowly run my tongue over it. I lick off what sullies Miyagi's palm, pressing the tip of my tongue against it.

Sweet.
The chocolate, mingled with cream, dissolves on my tongue.

Miyagi calls out sharply, "Sendai-san." Her voice is firm, but I grip her arm tighter than her words, continuing to lick past where the chocolate disappears. Even without flavor remaining, Miyagi's body heat is sweeter than any chocolate, and I press my lips firmly against her skin.

"Stop acting like a dog."

Miyagi scoffs in a low voice, like she's kicking a pebble far away. Reluctantly, I lift my head, and Miyagi speaks again, less than amused.

"I'm washing my hands."
"No, you're not."

I tug on her arm, keeping her in place.

"Is this payback for earlier?"
"Miyagi, you like this kind of thing, don't you?"

These exchanges have happened countless times before. It's often been on Miyagi's orders. So, there's no reason to be angry now.

"...Sendai-san."

Miyagi tugs my grip off her arm with deliberate force.

"What?"
"...Did you have someone in mind you wanted to give chocolates to for Valentine's?"

Though eager to wash her hands, Miyagi stops to ask a question I hadn't anticipated.

"Are you talking about friend chocolates?"
"No."
"If it's about that, then no one."
"And?"

"Were you going to give someone chocolates, Miyagi?"
"Of course not."
"Truly?"
"There's no point in lying. But honestly, you're the one who seems like you're lying, Sendai-san."
"I'm not."

I reply succinctly and return the spoon to Miyagi, but she approaches with it, prompting me to evade.

"Wait, Miyagi. You'll get me dirty."

It was a careless comment, but Miyagi doesn't seem to appreciate it and glares at me. I take a step back from the sink defensively.

Probably, she intends to do to me what I did to her earlier. Yet Miyagi, unlike me, wouldn't aim for a spot where the mess wouldn't matter. No, she'd deliberately target a place where the mess would be troublesome.

I call out to her softly, "Miyagi," and she sets the stained spoon into the sink. Relieved, I relax, only for Miyagi to grab my arm and bite my ear.

"Ouch!"

The reaction is instantaneous, my voice escaping before I can stop it. My earlobe, where her teeth pressed down hard, radiates warmth.

Her bite is strong enough that it feels like she might tear it away, a tingling sensation left behind. Miyagi's actions are always unexpected.

My body can't keep pace with her unforeseen actions, making my nerves overly sensitive, yet Miyagi’s warmth is so close that I want to enclose it, reaching to encircle her back. But before I can embrace her tightly, she releases my earlobe and steps away from me.

"When will you learn the meaning of holding back?"
"I was holding back."
"That was holding back?"

Ignoring my question, Miyagi turns her attention to the bowl of chocolate.

"Sendai-san, is the chocolate ready?"

Her voice is steady, prompting a small sigh from me.

"Not yet."

The chocolate can't be too soft or too hard; otherwise, it's a challenge to shape. Like Miyagi, I direct my gaze to the bowl of chocolate.

Chapter 87

A Different Sendai-san to Me (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 255

Making chocolate seems like a terribly futile act.

Even if you melt store-bought chocolate and reshape it, all you get is a chocolate in a different form. It makes more sense to enjoy it as it came.

Handmade is just a hassle.

Yet, Sendai-san insists on the handmade approach. And the chocolates she made were delicious last year and the year before. There's a reason to make them, I think.

Absolutely, without a doubt, this year's chocolates will also taste delicious.

"Miyagi, are you shaping the ganache into proper balls?"

"I'm doing it properly."

After mixing the melted chocolate with cream to make ganache, it's cooled, portioned, wrapped in film, and cooled again. Right now, I'm shaping the firm ganache into balls with my palms, but I'm doubtful whether following these steps precisely is necessary. However, with Sendai-san supervising right beside me, skipping any part isn't an option.

"You're not doing it right. Make it round like this," she says.

In the palm of Sendai-san's hand sits a smoothly rounded ganache.

"I am making them round."

"No, you're not. They're turning out weird."

Her words are harsh. All I did was add triangular ears to the ball-shaped ganache; that's not weird. No one ever said truffles couldn't have ears.

"…I see. Those are cat or dog ears, right? Are you making a face?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Well, there's such a thing as animal truffles, so if you want to make them, that's fine, but you might as well add eyes. Oh, but they'll get lost under the coating anyway."

"Isn't it just finished after shaping?"

"I said before we started, there's more to do. After shaping, we coat with cocoa powder, cover with melted chocolate, and then coat with cocoa powder again."

"I think it's pointless to keep repeating the same steps."

"I don't think it's pointless; it's written in the recipe."

Making chocolates might be akin to spiritual training. As I repeat these steps, any distracting thoughts seem to melt away like chocolate, leaving me feeling refreshed.

As I entertain these silly notions, Sendai-san skillfully rounds the chocolates and coats them with cocoa powder. I also shape the remaining chocolate, add ears, and roll them in cocoa powder.

After coating everything with cocoa powder, a new chocolate appears. Sendai-san starts doing things like water-bathing or tempering, and even takes out a thermometer.

The chocolate melts in the bowl, and ganache dipped in cocoa powder is submerged in it. Coated in shiny chocolate, the ganache is rolled in cocoa powder again, and the truffle is complete.

"This is a little extra."

With that, Sendai-san makes two large dots with melted chocolate on some of the truffles arranged on a plate.

"…Thanks."

"You're welcome."

The truffles with dots are the animal-themed ones I made with ears —those dots are probably eyes.

"Looking at them now, animal truffles are cute."

Sendai-san comments with a pleasant smile. But I don't think they turned out that cute.

The truffles I made are terribly misshapen. What were supposed to be ears just look like protrusions.

In contrast, the truffles lined up on the same plate that Sendai-san made are as pretty as she is. Perfectly round like the moon in the night sky.

"I'll clean up, so you just sit and relax, Miyagi."

With a smile, Sendai-san kindly suggests.

"Alright."

I reply softly and sit down after washing my hands. I watch Sendai-san's back.

Her hair in a half-up style is the same length as in high school. It's well-maintained and lustrous, reminiscent of a well-groomed borzoi.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to create a cat or a dog with the truffles. I think I just wanted to create something as beautiful as Sendai-san.

Tapping my heel against the chair leg, I exhale slowly.

My Sendai-san, like a well-behaved dog, has a composed demeanor, and is likely popular. But she's mine. She shouldn't belong to anyone else.

Yet, though she's mine, there are many things I don't understand. I don't know what she likes, what she dislikes, or if her words are truthful. I know it's impossible to fully comprehend her, but find frustration when she offers no clues for understanding her.

I want to wait for her likes and dislikes to be made, but I think I can’t wait too long.

"Miyagi, sorry to keep you waiting."

After finishing the dishes, Sendai-san comes over to me.

"That took forever."

"It wasn’t that long."

"It felt long."

I stand, reaching out to touch what is mine.

I verify the blue earrings, caress her cheek, and let a finger trail over her lips.

The same, yet not the same.

She is supposed to be similar to me, yet she is as different from me as newly made truffles. And so I want to confirm she is mine.

"What?"

"Just felt like it."

I say quietly and remove the finger from her lips.

"You can touch more."

"I’m good."

I nudge her shoulder, but instead of stepping back, she comes closer.

"Don’t step on my foot this time."

Sendai-san combs through my hair and traces her fingertips along my neck. She comes closer, and though my eyes stay open, she closes hers. Then, without asking or permission, she kisses me.

The first is light.

The second, long.

I sense her warmth. I don’t dislike these kisses with her.

Handmade truffles are delicious. Precisely, truffles made by Sendai-san are delicious.

I want to touch someone. Precisely, I want to touch Sendai-san.

Kisses feel nice. Precisely, kisses with Sendai-san feel nice.

These are feelings I hadn’t known before meeting Sendai-san, feelings I didn’t wish to know. When tracing these new emotions within me, they almost all lead back to her. The fine threads connecting me to her have multiplied, becoming thick strings. They won’t easily break and should not snap on their own either.

As our lips part, I pull on Sendai-san’s shirt. Quickly, she initiates a third kiss.

As my lips pressed against hers, her warm tongue slipped in as my mouth parted slightly, bringing with it her body heat. Her tongue gently and softly met mine, and as I pushed back, she squeezed my hand more firmly.

Sendai-san’s lips didn’t part from mine. Our tongues intertwined, and it became harder to breathe. Though it was just our lips, tongues, and clasped hands touching, it felt like my entire body was connected to hers. Every part that was touching and even those that weren't was uncomfortably hot.

—I can't let this go any further.

I pushed Sendai-san’s shoulder.

"Miyagi."

As our bodies separated, her slightly hoarse voice reached me. I leaned in and planted a kiss on her neck.

"Miyagi, stop it."

She said my name, but I sucked harder, leaving a mark of possession on her neck before pulling away.

"You don’t have work tomorrow, right?"

I rubbed the small red mark, my claim on her for anyone who might wonder. Then, carefully, so as not to hurt too much, I bit into it.

"Yeah, but—"

Her uncertain response flowed, and she caressed my back. Her hand traced the line of my shoulder blades, followed my spine, and tickled the nape of my neck. The sensation made my skin tingle, and as I lifted my head, Sendai-san plucked a truffle from the plate and popped it into my mouth.

"How is it?"

Delicious.

Really, incredibly so.

This year, I get to savor these delightful truffles all to myself. Neither Ibaraki-san nor Komatsu-san will taste them.

At least, that’s what I’ll have to believe if her words about "not having plans to meet Mio for a while" are true.

"Miyagi. Was it good?"

"It… was good."

There was no lie in my words, but now isn’t the time to eat truffles. I need to mark Sendai-san as mine properly.

"Then, maybe I should have a taste too."

Sendai-san took one of the misshapen truffles and tasted it, smiling as she declared it "delicious."

"Why did you eat that one? You should've tried these ones."

I pointed to the perfectly round truffles, more concerned about what she was eating than about making my mark. It's better if she enjoy a truffle that’s neat and rounded like a ball than one resembling neither cat nor dog.

"I thought of having the cute one. I want to savor them slowly. Let’s eat in my room or yours."

"It tastes the same no matter where we eat it, so here is fine."

"That’s not good enough. Pick one."

"…Fine, my room."

As I softly consented, Sendai-san said “Alright,” and planted a kiss on my cheek.

A Different Sendai-san to Me (II)

Part 256

"I want to make some tea, so wait a bit."

That's what Sendai-san said, so I couldn't bring the truffles right away. I waited for the electric kettle to boil the water, then watched as the tea was poured into the mug before carrying the truffles to the room. Once the plates and mugs were arranged on the table, Sendai-san said once again, "Wait."

"I want to take a picture of the truffles before eating."

"No."

I curtly respond to Sendai-san, who is kneeling next to me. But she doesn't give up.

"Since we went through all the trouble of making them, just one picture."

Before I could open my mouth, she had already taken a picture with her smartphone.

"...What are you going to do with a picture of truffles?"

"A memory of Valentine's."

Seated on the floor with crossed legs, Sendai-san replied succinctly.

She loves creating "memories."

She takes photos commemorating school festivals, the New Year, and anything of significance. Even her piercings were justified by a significant memory—she suggested wearing them when something memorable happened and gave me a piercing gun to pierce her ears on my birthday.

Being with Sendai-san means accumulating all sorts of nonsensical "memories."

Even things that wouldn't mean much to me alone somehow turn into memories.

It's an act of creating memories, and it weighs my heart down somewhat.

Happiness and sadness are proportional. The more joyful memories accumulate, the deeper the sorrow when they are lost.

I reach out and touch Sendai-san's earring.

"What?"

The day I pierced her ear, Sendai-san promised we'd eat a whole cake together on this year's birthday, and she intends to keep that promise. She might even take a photo this year. With more anniversaries, come more memories, and with that, more of Sendai-san fills my life.

Though this year will end, next year will come, but I have no intention of letting go of Sendai-san. Yet, she might come to dislike being mine.

I've lost count how many times I've thought about this, but I can't stop pondering it.

"What about Valentine's Day next year?"

As I ask, she grabs my hand, prompting me to let go of the earring.

"Just like this year. Even if not truffles, we'll make something together."

Her lips touch my fingertip and kiss the earring too. Though I never asked for a promise, she whispers "promise" in my ear. She doesn't promise for the year after next, nor the one after that. I don't exactly want those promises, but I am dissatisfied.

Yet, I fear being promised too.

I wouldn't want to face the pain of broken expectations.

A promise, much like a memory, leaves a slight weight on my heart.

"Well, before that is White Day though. How about we make cookies together?"

Sendai-san says with a cheerful voice and smiles brightly.

"We don't have to do anything for White Day."

"Why not?"

"It's tedious."

"Let's make cookies together. I'll bring dog or cat cookie shapes for you, Miyagi."

"...Sendai-san, do you think I'm a child?"

"Not like that, I just thought you might like to make animal-shaped cookies."

"I don't have to make them."

When baking treats, I don't necessarily need animal shapes.

Cookies have dough similar to clay, so I made them like animals by chance, and the rolled chocolate felt like clay, so I added ears for no particular reason. There isn't any deeper reason than that.

Besides, unlike Sendai-san, I don't particularly enjoy cooking and don't feel like baking treats just for a holiday.

"Don't frown, try some. It's delicious."

Her bright voice draws my eyes back to Sendai-san who brings a round truffle to my lips. Even though I didn't ask her to feed me, the truffle is pushed into my mouth.

Sweet.

I reach for another truffle, but Sendai-san does the same. She picks an irregular one from the plate and pops it into her mouth.

My brow furrows involuntarily.

"Eat the ones you made."

As I nudge her shoulder, I pick up one of the misshapen truffles. But before I can bring it to my mouth, my wrist is grabbed, redirecting the truffle towards her. She bites into the truffle along with my fingers.

Her teeth touch my nail, prompting me to pull my hand away. The truffle that should have been there is gone. I pull a tissue from the crocodile nearby and wipe my fingers.

"Delicious."

Her cheerful voice reaches me.

"Annoying. Don't take my truffles."

"Because you were going to eat mine."

With that, Sendai-san tries to take another oddly shaped truffle, so I tap her shoulder.

"I told you, eat your own. I'll eat what I made, you eat what you made."

"No way. I'll eat the ones you made, and you'll eat the ones I made. Plus, isn't it more Valentine-like to eat something someone else made?"

Sendai-san smiles brightly, seeking my agreement, but I can't comply.

"I'll feed you, so open wide, Miyagi."

As if it's only natural, Sendai-san picks up a perfectly round truffle and brings it to my mouth. So, just as she did, I bite into it, taking her fingers along with the truffle. After wiping her bite-marked fingers with a tissue, I ask,

"Then, for White Day? Are you going to eat what I make again?"

"Of course."

As expected, she answers, making me rise to my feet.

I walk over to the bookshelf, retrieve a box hidden behind a black cat plush and some mangas, and hand it to Sendai-san.

"Here, for you."

"Huh? What's this?"

"It's your Valentine's return gift. So we won't do anything for White Day."

I sit back down beside her and sip my tea.

"This seems like a Valentine's day gift, doesn't it?"

"Who cares, let it be for White Day."

The box I handed her contains chocolates, but there's no rule saying you can't give chocolates for White Day.

"It's not right. I'll give you a proper return gift on White Day. After we make cookies, I'll make whatever you want to eat."

"Sendai-san, you always seem eager to cook, do you like it that much?"

"Not particularly."

"But you're good at cooking, why?"

She claims no particular fondness for cooking, yet she eagerly makes food and excels in it, showing good skill and efficiency.

"Since entering high school, I've mostly cooked my own meals."

"...What about your mother?"

I can guess the answer.

Sendai-san didn't have a great relationship with her family and often joined me for meals during our high school days. Considering that, I suspected whether she never had someone cook for her or whether she simply didn't want anyone to.

"They told me I didn’t have to make anything. But my family isn't very close, so I didn’t feel like eating with them. Plus, after graduating high school, regardless of whether I got into college or not, I planned to live alone, so I thought I should learn to cook for myself."

Sendai-san supplemented the answer that was in my head with additional details. Her revelations painted a clearer picture of who Sendai Hazuki is, enriching my understanding of her.

Yet, I had nothing to offer her in return.

In moments like these, I never know what to say.

Saying "That must have been tough" feels off, just as "I hope you get along someday" does. Simply leaving it at "I see" doesn't sit right either.

So, what do I say?

Various words swirl around my head, yet I can't find the right ones. Eventually, I remain silent, gripping the small hand of the crocodile until Sendai-san shows the box I handed her and asks, "Thanks for this. Can I open it?"

"No, open it in your room."

"Okay, but... did you buy it with with Utsunomiya?"

Sendai-san asks flatly.

"I bought it by myself."

"Did you give the same thing to Utsunomiya?"

"I already told you I wouldn’t give Maika any chocolates."

"You didn’t say that. You only mentioned you didn't have plans to meet her."

"You're so meticulous, Sendai-san. Since I'm not meeting her on Valentine's Day, I won’t be giving her anything, and I'm different from you."

"What do you mean 'different'?"

"You give friend chocolates, don’t you? You always did."

Both when we were in our second and third year.

In high school, Sendai-san gave chocolates to her friends.

"I said I wouldn’t earlier. Since it’s a holiday, I’m not meeting any friends. I’m only seeing you, Miyagi."

With that, Sendai-san sips her tea and eats a truffle with ears.

"You are going to work, though, aren’t you?"

"Work is different. You gave me a kiss mark, isn't that enough?"

I know without being told.

Work is something she prioritizes over me. I’m not fond of the word "work" because it means my Sendai-san won’t listen to me, but I tolerate it. Yet, being told to be satisfied with just a mark becomes unbearable.

I reach out to the mark I had just left.

I gently rub the red mark with my fingertip and press slightly, but then my shoulder is grabbed.

"Sendai-san. What’s with this hand?"

I ask but receive no reply.

Instead, the grip on my shoulder tightens.

I’m pushed backward, and I reflexively place my hand on the floor.

"I’m asking what you’re doing."

"You seemed unsatisfied, so I thought maybe I should let you make more marks."

"If that's what you thought, move your hand."

It's apparent that Sendai-san is trying to push me down. For leaving marks on her neck, there's no need for anyone to be pushed down. In fact, it's easier for me to push Sendai-san down than the other way around.

"Don’t you think I should get something nice too, not just Miyagi?"

"I don’t."

I declare clearly, but Sendai-san’s weight presses harder on my shoulder. I don’t want to make friends with the floor, yet my back meets it.

"I won’t do anything you don’t want, so it’s fine."

Sendai-san grips my hand.

Instinctively, I attempt to pull my arm back, only to be drawn in; my hand guided inside the loose sweater she wears, encountering the smoothness of her side beneath the fabric.

"If I did this to you, you’d be upset, so you do it."

"...Won't you get angry, Sendai-san?"

"No reason to. I'm okay with marks too."

Her soft voice beckons me. When I call her name softly, the distance between us shortens and I press my lips to her neck.

I suck deeply, leaving more red marks.

Sendai-san doesn't get upset.

I let my hand slide up from her sides, stopping under her chest. I lightly press, feeling the hardness of bone, softness, and warmth.

Just touching her feels pleasant.

Since she is mine, as long as she doesn’t go to work, I can do what I want. Leave marks, touch without her getting angry. I could even undress her. Even her underwear—

I let my hand slide over her bra, feeling the soft curve beneath.

Knowing she won’t resist only amplifies my sense of possession over her.

"Do it properly."

Her words prompt me to encircle her back and trace my fingers over her bra clasp.

But today is Valentine's Day. If something were to happen, today could easily come back to us. It sticks in memory well, like Christmas, and remains with the date.

"Miyagi?"

Hearing her voice, I find myself unsure of what’s right, so I place my hand flat against her back. I know accuracy doesn't matter in situations like this, but I can't bring myself to move my hands further.

"Keep going; I like being touched by you."

Her voice, as sweet as chocolate, makes my heart thud.

Continuing, as she suggests, tempts me as the right move. Even so, I pull my hand from inside her sweater and touch her lips with my fingertips.

As she gazes intently at me, I lick her lips.

Sweet.

I want to confirm if that sweetness matches the truffles, so I press my lips to hers. Sendai-san's tongue enters, and it’s a kiss even sweeter and more dizzying than the one we shared in the shared space earlier. It feels like we've become something more than just roommates, and I push Sendai-san's shoulder.

"Miyagi."

Her dissatisfied voice reaches me.

"...Not today."

"When is okay?"

"I don’t know, but not today."

I tug at Sendai-san’s ear.

I avoid making a promise because once made, I will always be worried about the day. But it’s not that I don't want to touch her. Just that today would remain thoroughly in my memory, down to the date, and the sweetness of chocolates we made together would blur, and I dislike that.

"Get off."

Hearing my voice, Sendai-san’s face darkens. Yet, it only lasts a moment before she returns to her usual self. But still, she doesn’t move.

"...I won't promise now, but I might someday, so get off."

When I say that and push on her shoulder, she complies with my words.

A Different Sendai-san to Me (III)

Part 257

I had intended to take it slow over the spring break.

During the end of last year, there was Christmas. At the start of this year, Sendai-san kept me company, which forced me to live a relatively strict lifestyle. I even visited Sendai-san's part-time job and went to the zoo, so the winter break was quite busy.

Therefore, I planned to relax during the spring break. However, I was roped into participating in truffle-making, and it seems like I'm being forced into doing something for White Day too. I also have to meet with Komatsu-san.

But right now, I can't afford to be preoccupied with things that have already happened or plans that are still ahead.

I lay sprawled out on my bed, stroking the head of a black cat.

I don't want to go anywhere tomorrow.

It's been a little over a week since Valentine's Day, and I feel like a child reluctant to go to school. This mood is entirely Sendai-san's fault.

"This is ridiculous," I say.

I never said she could fill in my schedule for tomorrow, but she did it on her own.

The plan is for me, Sendai-san, and Maika to go out together. The purpose, of course, is to help Maika pick out some clothes. My schedule is filled with that plan.

It's a set decision that won't be overturned.

While it might change if I absolutely refuse, I don't have a good enough excuse to avoid it should Maika ask for reasons. Even though Sendai-san set the plan on her own, it's as if I don't even

have the right to refuse.

After dinner, Sendai-san mentioned the plan for tomorrow, casually adding it as she was going to take a bath, but this is too much of a surprise attack.

Maika had said she wanted Sendai-san to help choose her clothes. Since we were going out as a group, I thought I'd need to plan it, since Maika is my friend. I should have decided on when to go out with her, not Sendai-san. The fact that it was decided without my involvement leaves me unenthusiastic.

I toss the black cat plush into the air toward the ceiling and catch it.

These kinds of things require mental preparation; it’s not something to hastily decide. Sendai-san seems excited and wants to plan quickly, but I’m not the same.

"If you want to go out with Maika so much, why not just the two of you—"

No, that's no good.

I can't let Sendai-san and Maika go out alone.

Since we're supposed to be a group of three, we must go out together.

I sigh deeply.

It would be so much better if it were just Maika and me.

I don’t mind going out with Maika tomorrow, but I don’t want Sendai-san to be there. I prefer it when it’s just me going out with Maika. This feeling continues beyond just tomorrow. It’s a persistent, relentless thought.

In short, I don't want Sendai-san to meet Maika.

I can't stand the idea of Sendai-san and Maika talking without me.

The same goes for Komatsu-san and Noto-san.

I don’t want them meeting or talking with Sendai-san either.

I know the name of these feelings.

Even though I didn't want to acknowledge it, I became aware of this feeling during the school festival. It surfaces whenever others interact with Sendai-san. Even after the festival ended, it often came back to make me dislike myself.

I didn't need this possessiveness.

It's tied to another feeling I wish I'd remained unaware of.

—Jealousy.

Such trivial sentiments are dragged out from the depths of my heart.

I toss the black cat into the air toward the ceiling again, watching the black bundle with my eyes.

After catching it with both hands, I sit up and place it at the head of my bed. Using the bed as a makeshift chair, I grab my phone and bring up pictures from the school festival.

Sendai-san and me.

Sendai-san and Maika.

There are many photos with Sendai-san.

Just as people stick labels on mementoes to catalog them, I apply labels to the feelings I was reluctant to acknowledge. Though it's unnecessary, I carefully separate these feelings from others, classify them, name them, and write on the labels in large letters. The words written are indelible, and the labels adhere tightly inside me, refusing to peel away. Ignored though they might be, more keep appearing, leaving my insides cluttered with labels.

It's truly aggravating.

However, there is a way to make the labels less conspicuous.

All I need is to have Sendai-san tied to me.

Promise, bond, constraint.

Any way to connect is good.

The stronger the method, the more effective it is.

For instance, a collar to connect her to this room—

I exhale heavily.

Sendai-san belongs to me, so she’s already tethered.

The blue earrings are proof she belongs to me, and if that's not enough, I could mark her body with a red sign. She will never belong to Maika.

So, it will be alright.

I caress the earring hanging from the hole Sendai-san opened. I press the small flower with my fingertips and tug at my earlobe when I hear a knock at the door.

"Miyagi, can I come in for a bit?"

I hear Sendai-san’s voice, and after I change the screen on my phone, I grab the black cat.

"Wait, I’ll open it now."

I place the black cat on the bookshelf and open the door.

"Sendai-san, what is it?"

"I have something to ask. Can I come in?"

"…Fine."

Though not very welcoming, I let Sendai-san into the room and sit on the floor, using the bed as a backrest. However, she remains standing in front of the bookshelf, not sitting beside me.

"What are you doing?"

"I noticed that the black cat had fallen over, so I sat it upright. Does it have a name?"

"No."

I try to recall whether I remembered to place the nameless black cat back on the shelf, but I can't. It feels like I did, as usual, but also like I didn't.

"Aren’t you going to name it?"

"No. Was that what you wanted to ask, Sendai-san?"

"No, but should I name it for you?"

"No. If I leave it to Sendai-san, you might name it something mundane like 'Kuro-chan.'"

"…How about 'Roro-chan'? Isn’t that cute?"

"It’s hard to pronounce. More importantly, what did you want to ask?"

"I was going to ask if I could touch your hair."

With those words, Sendai-san sits on the bed and lightly tugs my hair.

"Now?"

I gently hit her hand and ask.

"Tomorrow. I want to do a three-strand braid and make up before we go out."

"Absolutely not."

"I knew you’d say that. Miyagi, you're really stingy, aren’t you?"

Without sounding particularly disappointed, she pulls at a section of hair a little off from my crown.

"It’s just a quick three-strand braid from here to around the ear. I’ll only braid this side, so it’ll be done quickly."

"I said no."

There’s no need for unnecessary fuss. Rather than such trivial exchanges, I'd prefer talking about something else.

"…Why did you plan it for tomorrow?"

I look at Sendai-san, who is wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt with a cardigan over it. She has just stepped out of the bath, her long hair untied and her face free from makeup. This relaxed version of Sendai-san is probably something only I get to see.

"Why not tomorrow? There's no point in postponing it, right? Utsunomiya probably wants to buy clothes soon, and you never decide when to do things, Miyagi. Plus, Mio is coming over next month, so it's better to settle plans early, isn't it?"

"I guess, but..."

"Was it inconvenient? You said you were free, so I thought tomorrow would work."

It’s true that I told her I didn’t have plans, but that didn’t mean I left my schedule open specifically for an outing with Maika. However, knowing that complaining now would be futile, there was only one thing left to say.

"It's not inconvenient."

"Then it's fine, right? Back to our earlier discussion—if you don't want me doing your hair or makeup, at least let me pick out your clothes."

"No way."

"Then how about an order?"

"You always say things like that."

"Come on, the person who's getting ordered doesn't mind it, so how about some orders, Miyagi? How about an exchange? Let’s trade an order for something I want to do."

"I don't want to."

"You like to give orders, don't you? Just do it."

"Being told to order you feels off."

Though I don’t dislike giving orders to Sendai-san, I don’t want to be coerced into it. Being told to issue an order feels like I'm following her command, which makes it akin to being ordered around by her in a way.

"Then let me take care of your hair tomorrow. And do your makeup."

As long as you don't do it for Maika.

If we can agree on such a condition, I’d allow Sendai-san to touch my hair or do my makeup. But I can't actually say that.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san descends from the bed and sits beside me.

She reaches out to stroke my hair and then my cheek, the scent of the same shampoo we both use tickling my nose, making me acutely aware of her presence.

"...Just a bit, then."

I can’t make her promise not to style Maika’s hair or do her makeup, but at least tomorrow, it will just be me.

"That’s fine. No need for marks?"

"Not now."

"Then how about me marking you, Miyagi?"

"No."

After a small mutter of "stingy," Sendai-san naturally presses her lips to mine. The contact was brief, just a momentary touch before she pulled away.

The kisses she gives help conceal the feelings labeled inside me.

So, when I tug on Sendai-san's cardigan, she leans in to kiss me again.

Chapter 88

Miyagi is Always in a Bad Mood (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 258

"It looks great, doesn't it? So cute."

The curtain of the fitting room opens, and I call out to Utsunomiya, who is wearing the skirt I chose.

"Which do you think is better, this or the earlier one?"

"Hmm, let's see. The earlier one was good too, but... if I had to pick one, I think this one suits you better, Utsunomiya."

"Shiori, what do you think?"

"I think the skirt you're wearing now is better, but which one do you like, Maika?"

"That's the thing, I like both. The skirts Sendai-san picked out are both so cute. Ah, I wish I were an oil baron."

Utsunomiya spins around to see herself in the fitting room mirror and sighs, and Miyagi giggles, saying, "If you become an oil baron, buy me something too."

It's peaceful.

Under the guise of choosing clothes for Utsunomiya, we've gathered and spent about three hours now. Two tops have been chosen, and we're currently selecting a skirt. The protagonist of the day, Utsunomiya, doesn't show a hint of displeasure despite visiting multiple stores and remains in high spirits, eagerly trying on clothes multiple times.

Truly, it's peaceful.

If only Miyagi's good mood extended to me.

"Then I'll go with this one."

Utsunomiya, who had been chatting cheerfully with Miyagi, said that while glancing at her reflection in the mirror. Then she adds, "Wait a moment," and closes the fitting room curtain.

Today, Miyagi is in a good mood.

She's been all smiles in front of Utsunomiya.

Yesterday, she graciously allowed me to braid her hair a little, and even let me do her makeup. While she didn't permit her ears to be visible, the braid resting on one side suited her, and the lip balm she let me apply, which I bought, looked good on her too. She even wore a skirt.

So, the always cute Miyagi is exceptionally adorable today.

Yet the girl standing in front of the fitting room won't look at me.

She's only in a good mood with Utsunomiya.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Utsunomiya emerges from the fitting room. After returning one of the two skirts to where it originally hung, she heads to the register with the chosen one.

There are a fair number of people in the store, and the queue at the register is no exception.

Utsunomiya doesn’t seem to be coming back any time soon.

As I gaze at the clothing overflowing the bustling store, I raise my voice toward Miyagi, who stands in that perfect spot, not quite near but not too far away.

"What's up with you today?"

"Nothing's wrong."

A curt voice, absent the warm tone reserved for Utsunomiya, replies.

Today, the otherwise cheerful Miyagi is only in bad spirits with me. While waiting in front of the fitting room for Utsunomiya, she hasn't spoken to me once. Despite Utsunomiya trying on clothes multiple times, not a word from her. As we moved from store to store, she didn't walk beside me. Utsunomiya was always between us, which isn't inherently a problem, but the cheerful Miyagi felt distant.

There's no way a Miyagi like this has "nothing wrong."

Did she not really want to braid her hair or wear makeup? Not actually want to wear a skirt? Was everything the issue? I ponder these questions but find no answers. Today, Miyagi didn't object to any of it.

Could it perhaps be that my ponytail is the problem? But before we left the house, she voiced no complaints.

"Miyagi."

No response.

Voices discussing things like "This is cute, do they have it in my size?" echo around us, but Miyagi's voice is nowhere to be heard. The noise exists solely within the store. I fiddle with my earrings and tug at my earlobe. At a loss for words, I fall silent until Utsunomiya returns.

"Sorry for the wait."

A cheerful voice fills the silence between us.

"You bought quite a lot."

I comment while glancing at the increased number of bags, and Utsunomiya responds with a smile.

"It's a big splurge from my New Year's gift money. Looks like I'll be living frugally for a while. This year, I'm thinking of getting a part-time job."

"Maika, are you going to work part-time?"

"Once spring break's over, I'm thinking I'll seriously consider it."

"I see."

"Does Asakura-san know any good part-time jobs?"

"She goes to a lot of events, so she works a lot, right? Asakura-san."

Hearing snippets of university life that are unknown to me, I learn that Asakura-san, whom we met at the school festival, and Miyagi continue to stay in touch.

New information brings both joy and irritation.

Knowing who Miyagi is friends with at university and what they talk about is a good thing, but once I know, that information turns into jealousy. I can’t help but be envious of Utsunomiya, who knows things I cannot acquire, and Asakura-san, who is associated with Miyagi.

"How about it, Shiori? Want to join me in working part-time?"

Hearing a shocking suggestion, I think that, ideally, it should be me, not Utsunomiya or Asakura-san, working part-time alongside Miyagi.

Well, there's no way Miyagi would say she'll get a part-time job.

"No way. Part-time jobs are a hassle."

As expected, comes her predictable reply.

"Then how about trying something on? This skirt here is cute."

"There's no point in trying on clothes right now."

"Since we’re here, why not just try it on?"

"I'm not interested."

"Why not? What do you think, Sendai-san?"

Unexpectedly hearing such words, I gaze intently at Miyagi before surveying the skirts lined up in the store.

White, yellow, black.

Plaid, polka dots, and floral patterns.

There are many colors and patterns to choose from. If I decided, I could select any skirt, but it's doubtful Miyagi would try them on repeatedly like Utsunomiya does, or even just once, since this is a conversation progressing while disregarding her will.

Nevertheless, from among the numerous skirts, I pick a blue long skirt.

"What about this? It seems to go well with the usual hoodie-type clothes that Miyagi wears. Give it a try."

Today, she wore the blue scarf I gave her as a Christmas present around her neck until we came here, but its season is ending. So, I want her to wear a blue skirt instead. Even if it isn't the exact blue of my earrings, having the color blue in common would still make me happy.

"I'm not buying anything, so there's no point in trying it on."

A curt voice replies, though not as cold as before due to Utsunomiya's presence.

"Shiori, come on. It's just trying it on."

"It's a hassle."

"You say that too easily. Isn't it okay to try just once?"

Exactly.

Don't be stingy, just try it on.

I swallow the words rising in my throat. If I were to say "try it on," Miyagi would absolutely refuse.

"Fine, just once."

Miyagi reluctantly says, taking the blue skirt from me and disappearing into the fitting room. It seems she's willing to listen to Utsunomiya.

"Sendai-san. I didn't mention it because Shiori might dislike it, but..."

In front of the closed fitting room curtain, Utsunomiya gives me a smile.

"Shiori looks super cute today. I really wanted to say it more when we met at the meeting point, but she stopped me, saying it was enough."

I laughed at Utsunomiya's words with an "Ahaha". Miyagi had indeed been stopping Utsunomiya, who kept exclaiming how cute she looked at the meeting point. The whole scene was so endearing that I couldn't help but boast about how I had styled her hair, done her makeup, and picked out her skirt.

Today's Miyagi could be said to be a creation of my own making. It's delightful to hear her being complimented. While I have a desire to keep her to myself, I also want everyone to know just how cute Miyagi truly is.

"Sendai-san, you're like Shiori's personal stylist. She looked really cute during the school festival too."

"Thanks. Maybe I'll live as Miyagi's personal stylist after graduating college. Not that I'm expecting to get paid."

"Then you'd need a side job."

"In that case, maybe I'll keep tutoring."

"Continuing with tutoring instead of working at a café?"

"Being a tutor seems like it would give me more time to work as a stylist."

Utsunomiya laughed and agreed, "True enough," as we shared a conversation not meant for Miyagi's ears, when the fitting room curtain opened.

"...I tried it on."

Miyagi, looking somewhat dissatisfied, turned her gaze to

Utsunomiya.

"Shiori, you look cute. It suits you."

"Cute is unnecessary. Does it really suit me?"

"It does suit you. Right, Sendai-san?"

"Yeah. It looks nice. Really cute."

Trying not to raise my voice too much, I conveyed a concentrated burst of "cute" as if speaking it a hundred times.

"Shiori, is there anything else you'd like to try on? Or maybe you'd like to visit another store?"

"I'm fine. I'll buy this."

"Eh?"

I voiced my surprise at Miyagi's revelation to Utsunomiya, as I hadn't expected her to mention buying it.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"I'll get changed, so wait for me."

The fitting room curtain closed and shortly afterward, Miyagi emerged and purchased the blue skirt.

"I don't have to wear a hoodie with this, so make sure to pair it properly."

Though not entirely friendly, Miyagi quietly said this only to me upon returning from the register.

"Leave it to me."

"Where to next?"

Utsunomiya asked, and Miyagi replied, "Anywhere is fine."

"Sendai-san, aren't you going to buy anything?"

"No, I shopped quite a bit last month."

"I see."

I couldn't discern why Miyagi chose to buy the skirt I had picked out. Today, Miyagi only seems to be in high spirits with Utsunomiya, not coming to stand next to me. With Utsunomiya in the center, she seems to keep her distance from me, so it's hard to believe she'd purchase something I chose.

Yet, I'm happy.

Miyagi hadn't once called me Sendai-san today, but that's a minor detail.

Maika, Maika, Maika—it was always Utsunomiya's name being called, but since Miyagi tried on the skirt I chose, purchased it, and asked me to coordinate it, that makes up for everything. Though thoughts of having been alone with Miyagi today and jealousy toward Utsunomiya receiving Miyagi's smiles played in my mind, I'm glad Utsunomiya was here.

"Shiori, is there something you'd like to see?"

"Not really."

If it were just the two of us, it seemed like she'd suggest going home already, but she doesn't quite say it outright. Nonetheless, she appears to want to leave. However, it feels too early to part ways after going through the effort of gathering the three of us.

"Come to think of it, there is something I'd like to see. Is that okay?"

"What is it you want to see?"

Utsunomiya looks at me.

"A pencil case. One of my tutoring students just got into high school, so it's a celebratory gift. Can we stop to look for one?"

The student mentioned wanting to use it in high school. Kikyo-chan had admired the cat pencil case Miyagi gave me, so it might have

piqued her interest as a congratulatory gift.

"Of course," answered Utsunomiya energetically.

It’s fine to wander aimlessly in the mall, visiting various stores, but that might not sit well with Miyagi. A stationary shop selling pencil cases could also provide something enjoyable for Miyagi to pass the time.

"Then, let’s head to the stationary store next."

Miyagi didn’t say a word.

With Utsunomiya taking the lead, we walked with her in the center towards the stationary store.

Miyagi is Always in a Bad Mood (II)

Part 259

I found more pencil cases than expected.

However, with a fixed budget in mind, the choices inevitably narrow down. Thus, as soon as we reached the store, I knew which pencil case would make the perfect gift, but I kept it to myself.

"What do you think would be good?"

Not wanting to end our outing too quickly, I decided to ask the others for their opinions.

"I don’t know much about the student you're tutoring, Sendai-san," Utsunomiya said earnestly.

"Choose according to your preferences. Miyagi, what do you think?"

I knew she wouldn’t answer me. Yet, I yearned for an excuse to talk with Miyagi, who had been silent all day.

"...Since she got help with choosing clothes today, Maika will answer," came Miyagi's voice, not from my side, but from beside Utsunomiya.

"But you’re the one who was asked, Shiori."

"Just hurry," Miyagi insisted.

"Well, if it were me..."

Utsunomiya studied the pencil cases intently between us, before pointing at a pretty flower-patterned one after a moment's thought.

"Maybe this one? What does Shiori think?"

The ever-reticent Miyagi, who hadn’t answered my question, chose a pencil case with a cute penguin family on it.

I understood that Miyagi treated me indifferently whereas Utsunomiya was spared such coldness. Being questioned by Utsunomiya compelled her to respond, which left me with mixed feelings.

Nevertheless, I couldn’t complain to Miyagi, so I merely smiled and said, "They're both cute," as I picked up the flower-patterned and penguin-decorated cases.

Both seemed to suit them and were appealing in their own ways. The penguin case, especially, was very "Miyagi-like," compelling me to buy it and display it with Pen-chan. However, penguins didn't fit Kikyo-chan’s image, and the floral one might be too cute.

"I bet you’ve already decided," Miyagi's voice rang out.

My general preference had been set before coming, and I had done some online research. Although Miyagi wasn’t aware of this, she was perceptive at such times.

"Having others around makes me want to hear their opinions too," I replied, smiling, and placed the pencil cases back where they belonged.

"No need for that. Which one did you decide on?"

"I'm thinking of this one," I said, picking up a canvas pencil case.

Slightly larger than the others, its size was akin to the one Kikyo-chan regularly used, but with a more subdued design. Its price was just right, neither too high nor too low.

"Is that the image you have of your student?" Utsunomiya asked brightly, while Miyagi, who had inquired with a different tone, remained silent, though her eyes stayed fixed on the case. Ideally, I wished for her to look at me rather than the stationery, but I couldn't say that aloud. I answered the question instead.

"She's a bit more energetic."

"Got it," Utsunomiya responded.

"I'm going to buy it, so wait here," I said, heading for the cashier with the case in hand.

Miyagi's mood didn't improve.

Not knowing how to ease the tension, I decided to leave it to Utsunomiya.

I lined up at the register, paid, and requested gift-wrapping.

I walked slowly, taking a longer route.

Even if the beautifully dressed Miyagi wasn’t looking at me today, I wanted to see her. I longed to be beside her, not separated by Utsunomiya, yet it was Utsunomiya who helped create the lovely Miyagi today, so excluding her wasn’t an option.

Still, deep down, I wanted to be beside Miyagi.

Even though I felt guilty, I couldn't suppress my desire to be near her.

"Let’s get back."

After taking a deep breath, I returned to the others, putting on a smile.

"Sorry for the wait. There are some cute tissue covers over there—want to take a look?"

"Yes, I do! We need to find a new friend for the crocodile in your room, Shiori."

"I don't need that many tissue covers."

"Choosing a new resident for Utsunomiya's room doesn’t sound bad either."

We browsed the tissue covers, checked out some accessories, and admired the tableware. When Miyagi approached the polar bear coasters and seemed to drift further away, I felt an urge to call out, "Do you want that?"

Before I could, Utsunomiya gently tugged at my arm.

"Sendai-san."

"What is it?"

"Did you have another argument with Shiori?"

She whispered, ensuring Miyagi wouldn't hear.

"Why do you ask?"

"Shiori's different today. Her energy is high, yet she isn't talking much with you... Something feels off, doesn't it?"

I knew.

I knew she'd think that.

Miyagi may have tried to act naturally, but her reluctance to talk unless prompted wasn't normal. Ensuring she didn't walk right next to me was also out of the ordinary.

"…I guess it shows."

I didn't deny it, although we hadn't argued. Attempting to clear the misunderstanding could complicate matters.

"Shiori's still keeping a bit of distance, after all."

"Yeah, it's a bit distant."

"I'll let her know to make up with you soon."

"Thanks."

I expressed gratitude, leaving the misunderstanding as it was, and received a smile in return.

"No, thank you. Thanks to you, Sendai-san, I found some great clothes today. I'm glad you helped me choose."

"I'm happy to hear it was helpful."

"I might ask you again."

"For what?" Miyagi, who'd been a short distance away, appeared

before us, directing her question to Utsunomiya.

"For choosing clothes."

"I see," Miyagi responded disinterestedly, picking up an enameled mug. Plain and without logo or illustrations, it seemed unlike her typical choices.

"I like choosing clothes, so anytime," I said, addressing Utsunomiya over Miyagi, who wouldn't meet my gaze.

"You really do enjoy picking out clothes for others, don't you, Sendai-san?"

"I guess so."

I loved both looking at and choosing clothes.

While mostly selecting for myself before, I hadn't particularly enjoyed choosing for others until now. Now, I found joy in selecting for Miyagi, which extended to enjoying choosing for others besides her.

Of course, Miyagi was always my first choice, and that preference would never change.

"That's why you're choosing clothes for Shiori too."

"Even if she rarely lets me."

"I'd gladly let you choose outfits for me any time," Utsunomiya noted thoughtfully, drawing Miyagi's attention as she placed the cup back and looked at me.

"...What about tutoring?"

Miyagi's low voice reached me.

"I believe I'm quite suited for it," I replied.

"Do you like it?"

"I think I might."

"See? There are things you like after all."

Miyagi fell silent at those words.

Her gaze shifted from me to the red mug. If she's going to look, I wish she'd look at me instead, but that desire doesn't reach her.

"Shiori, are you going to buy that mug?"

"I'm not buying it. Besides, I'm hungry."

To avoid any awkward pauses, I quickly followed up on Miyagi's comment and asked both of them.

"Then let's eat something. What do you want?"

"I'm fine with anything. What about you, Shiori?"

"I want hamburg steak."

"Shiori, you eat hamburg steak quite often."

Utsunomiya chuckled softly.

"I'm okay with anything too, so let's go where there's good hamburg steak for Miyagi," I suggested, pulling up nearby restaurants on my phone. We left the store, heading towards an old-fashioned mansion-like restaurant. As we entered, the delicious aroma made my stomach, which wasn't that empty, grumble quietly.

As we ordered, my mind flashed back to the time I made hamburg steak for Miyagi. After the juicy, flavorful dish arrived, the three of us cleanly devoured it with delight. We parted ways with Utsunomiya, waving her off with smiles.

Finally, with Miyagi beside me once more, we boarded the train. Though I thought she might start talking, she barely responded to my attempts with half-hearted replies.

While the train continued its rhythm, our conversation was stagnant. It wasn't until I had almost given up that Miyagi's voice, tinged with displeasure, emerged.

"…Were you talking to Maika about something?"

Though I was happy she spoke up, it seemed the topic wasn't going to be an interesting one.

"What do you mean by 'something'?"

"I wouldn’t know."

"When are you talking about?"

Miyagi didn’t answer, clamming up like an oyster.

The silence was suffocating, heavy in the air.

At our usual stop, we disembark and start the walk home. Lit by streetlamps, the path appeared gloomier than usual. In this dim atmosphere, as if shrouded in mist, Miyagi's small voice finally broke through.

"…After we chose the pencil case."

Feeling chilly, Miyagi clutched her blue scarf tightly, taking a step ahead as if evading me.

"Eh?"

"The answer from earlier."

The abrupt delivery of the answer to my question on the train startled me, and I rushed to reply.

"She just thanked me for helping her choose clothes."

Though it's the truth, it wasn't what Miyagi wanted to hear. What she sought was probably about the inquiry, "Did you have a fight with Shiori?" but saying that was unnecessary.

"That’s not something to whisper secretly about."

"We weren’t whispering. You were just away from us."

"…It looked sneaky."

"We weren't."

I gently corrected her and walked beside Miyagi, who had taken a step ahead. Just then, her phone started ringing from her bag, but she continued to walk without checking it.

"Your phone's ringing."

I pointed out, watching as Miyagi's brow furrowed. Reluctantly, she fished out her phone, glancing at the screen before her frown deepened.

"Sendai-san."

She finally called my name, though not kindly. Her voice was thorny, and it sends a chill down my neck, exposed by the pontyail.

"…What did you say to Maika?"

"Was it from Utsunomiya just now?"

"Don't answer my question with a question."

"I didn’t tell her anything strange. So, what did Utsunomiya say?"

"She said to apologize to Sendai-san. …Did you tell Maika something weird?"

Utsunomiya's kindness was almost painful, like a throbbing at the temples.

She did say she'd tell us to make up quickly.

I didn't expect her words to become reality so soon. It was almost too timely. I'm grateful, but Miyagi's mood had soured even more.

"She only asked if we'd had a fight."

If I stayed silent, it would only worsen her mood, so I opted for honesty.

"Why do I seem like the bad one here? We haven't fought, so make sure to tell Maika that."

"I could have said that, but Utsunomiya figured you were acting

strangely because of a fight. If I denied it, she'd probably just ask why you were acting that way. Are you okay with that?"

"I wasn't acting strange."

Her voice was barely audible.

"You were. You wouldn't talk unless I initiated, and you wouldn't even call my name."

I let out a sigh, unintentionally sounding accusatory, though it wasn't my intent. I didn't want the day, which should have been enjoyable, to conclude like this.

After exhaling again, Miyagi quickened her pace, almost leaving me behind. Instinctively, I grabbed her arm.

"Where are you going?"

I wanted to get home, to gaze at the Miyagi I had created today until I was satisfied and kiss her countless times, but I didn't want to be left behind like this. I wanted us to go home together.

"Home."

"I figured. The house isn't going anywhere, so slow down a bit."

Miyagi said nothing, nor did she slow down.

I tugged gently on her arm.

"Should we hold hands?"

Though she wore a scarf today, she had no gloves.

Holding hands would let us feel each other's warmth.

"No."

Her quick refusal prompted me to grip her arm a bit tighter.

"Then walk slower."

"I'll slow down if you let go."

"If you slow down first, I'll let go."

Miyagi finally reduced her pace.

Miyagi is Always in a Bad Mood (III)

Part 260

For Miyagi, a phrase like "switch gears" doesn't exist in her vocabulary, and even if it did, she wouldn’t seem inclined to apply it right now.

Therefore, her mood doesn't change abruptly.

"I'm going to put my coat and bag away, so make sure you open the door when I knock."

I speak to Miyagi, whose bad mood seems likely to linger until tomorrow morning if left unchecked.

"Why bother saying such a thing?"

"Because you look like you wouldn't open it unless I mentioned it."

Miyagi, as per my request, walked slowly all the way home.

However, she wore a displeased expression the entire time and avoided looking at me both when she took off her blue scarf at the entrance and when we entered the shared space. Moreover, she tried to escape into her room, prompting me to insist she open the door when I knocked.

"So what, does this mean Sendai-san is coming to my room?"

"Yes, it does. I want to talk for a bit."

"I don’t."

Standing as a gatekeeper in front of her room, Miyagi answers coldly.

"Then, what’s your reason for not wanting to talk? Depending on the reason, I might reconsider knocking today."

The reasons Miyagi doesn’t want to talk to me are probably trivial.

Hence, she shouldn't be able to refuse me.

"I see no need to explain my reasons to Sendai-san."

"When turning down my invitation to talk, it’s only polite to provide a reason."

"...If you come within five minutes, I’ll open it."

Reluctantly, begrudgingly—either way, her voice drifts low.

"Got it. I’ll be there soon."

As long as she lets me in, I don’t mind the five-minute constraint. Although I considered making tea, foregoing it should give me ample time.

I head to my room, placing my coat and bag down. Leaving my phone behind to avoid any untimely interruptions, I adjust my hair briefly in the mirror, head to the shared space, and knock twice on her door.

“Come in.”

A voice that doesn’t quite denote a good mood welcomes me as I open the door. Ruffling the head of the black cat Roro-chan on the bookshelf, I settle beside Miyagi, who leans against the bed.

"What did you want to talk about?"

Her voice is cold. Even though I sit close enough to grasp her hand instantly, she doesn’t pull away. I extend my hand toward Miyagi, who looks the same as when we went out, and gently tug at her skirt, only for her to smack my hand away.

"Miyagi, isn’t there something you want to say to me?"

Though she allows me to sit next to her, she won’t allow any touching. I prod further.

"No. Since Sendai-san wanted to talk, aren't you the one who should speak?"

"I meant I want to hear what Miyagi has to say. You've been in a

bad mood all day—can you say why?"

"I wasn't in a bad mood. That was normal."

"If it was normal, wouldn't you at least call the name of the person you're with? You didn't call me Sendai-san even once while we were with Utsunomiya."

"That's just your imagination."

Miyagi states without looking at me.

"It's not my imagination. You didn't call me."

My memory is vivid. No matter how much I recall, it was only Utsunomiya who referred to me as "Sendai-san," not Miyagi. She only started calling me that after parting from Utsunomiya. It seems she consciously avoided using my name.

"If not saying your name bothers you, I'll say it now... Hazuki. That should cover the times I didn't say it today, right?"

My name is treated carelessly, accompanied by the addition of "go back to your room."

That's not it.

I've always wanted her to call me Hazuki, and it's uplifting, yet this isn't right. Summing all the unsaid "Sendai-san" throughout the time with Utsunomiya into this single, dismissive "Hazuki" is unreasonable.

"Miyagi. If you're going to call me Hazuki, put a bit more heart into it."

"I did."

"Saying you did means doing it like this."

I gently pull Miyagi's skirt again, drawing her gaze to meet mine. I lock eyes with the sulking Miyagi.

"Shiori."

Calling the name I was warned many times not to use, I utter it softly and tenderly, pouring all the feelings from those lost opportunities into it. Miyagi's brow furrows in response.

Not that I didn't anticipate this reaction—it's strangely amusing.

"I never said you could call me that."

"If you don't want me to call you Shiori, then just say what's on your mind. If I did something wrong, tell me and I'll fix it."

I gaze intently at Miyagi, and our locked eyes disconnect. She then tugs at the braid by her ear and mutters in a low voice.

"...I didn't hear anything about buying a pencil case."

"I didn't mention it, but we had time, and adding one shopping errand wasn't a bother, right?"

Though it might have been unexpected, it wasn't significant enough to warrant advance notice.

"It's not fine... Sendai-san, you really love your tutoring job, don't you?"

Miyagi's hand gently pushes against my shoulder, as if to say, "move away."

"It's not that I love it."

"But you love it enough to buy a pencil case as a celebration for someone's acceptance to high school. If you enjoy it that much, you should continue to teach that kid."

"That's not what this is about."

"Then, is anyone okay for you to teach?"

"It's not just anyone."

"It's not just anyone, that's why you got that kid a pencil case and teach her, right?"

What is this?

This conversation.

It’s nonsensical.

What is this?

This reaction.

It lacks logic.

This feels almost like—

An impossible word crosses my mind. But knowing it's something not to be spoken aloud, I choose different words.

“Are you perhaps upset about buying the celebratory gift because it involves my part-time work?”

“I’m not upset. I just didn’t like it... Also, I found out about something you like, and you didn’t tell me.”

Words spill from Miyagi’s mouth as though trying to push the words in my mind away, prompting me to reflexively respond with a "Eh?"

“Sendai-san, you like teaching, right?”

With a tone as if confirming there are no forgotten items, Miyagi speaks.

“Yes, but…”

“And you like choosing clothes too, right?”

“Yes, but…”

I agree, as I’ve indeed said that before. Teaching and selecting clothes are activities I enjoy.

There is no mistake in those words.

However, I sensed that Miyagi’s inquiry about things I like had a different intention.

"Was it a lie?"

"It’s not a lie, but..."

There is no deceit in the word “like,” yet it isn’t entirely accurate, leaving my answer strained.

Unspoken to her, Miyagi's phrase, "the things I like," all ties back to her.

If it weren't for Miyagi, I wouldn't have thought to teach anyone, nor would I have considered taking on a tutoring job. The same goes for clothes—if Miyagi hadn’t been my roommate, I probably wouldn't have discovered that I enjoyed picking out clothes for someone else.

So, neither answer truly satisfies the question concerning Miyagi.

"If it's not a lie, why didn’t you tell me?"

In moments like these, I want to speak the truth.

I started to love teaching because of my feelings for Miyagi.

I started to love picking clothes because of my feelings for Miyagi.

That’s what I wish to convey. If I could tell the truth freely, I'd say it over and over. However, confessing this would mean vocalizing the underlying feelings I have for Miyagi, which might cause everything to fall apart.

"Because it didn’t feel like something I was passionate enough to mention."

Whether Miyagi would accept this evasive answer is uncertain, but I have no better words.

Words like "love" create fractures in the relationship between roommates. If I want to continue living with Miyagi by my side, I must keep this word sealed until she renounces the term "roommate."

"Is that really all you wanted to say, Miyagi? There's more, isn't there? You seemed upset even before buying the pencil case."

To prevent further discussion about my preferences, I steer the conversation back on track.

"...I don’t want to say."

Miyagi mumbles this and falls silent.

Despite having something to say, it seems she has no intention of sharing it.

"Tell me."

"Leave. I don’t want to talk anymore."

With that, Miyagi pushes me away, creating distance and placing a crocodile tissue cover between us. She then starts crumpling tissues and throwing them at me.

One, two—

The tissue balls roll across the floor, gradually accumulating. When I see there are five of them, I grab Miyagi's arm.

"Tell me, and I'll leave."

Miyagi makes a face of disgust and shakes my hand off, gathering the five tissue balls and tossing them all at once. The soft missiles fall harmlessly to the floor, and she calls to me in a strained voice.

"Sendai-san."

With her voice, she pulls me closer. It's unclear who moved first, but soon, our lips meet.

In short, we kiss—something out of the blue, untimely, unexpected… Yet, there it is—our lips, touching.

Though I'd dreamed of kissing Miyagi countless times, surprise overtakes my joy.

Accidentally keeping my eyes open, I see her image.

Even without clarity, she's undeniably adorable.

The soft sensation and warmth transmitted from her lips feel pleasant.

Miyagi's tongue parts my lips, deepening the kiss. Her tongue lightly brushes and connects with mine.

Our body temperatures meld and flow into each other.

While I’m overjoyed, I also feel at a loss about what to do.

I long to respond, to intertwine my tongue with hers, but I fear such a move might make her retreat.

I want to savor Miyagi’s warmth within me as long as possible.

Simultaneously, I wish to feel her even more strongly.

Closing my eyes, I hesitantly press my tongue against hers. The moist warmth seeps in, turning to heat within me. When I gently bite her soft, resilient tongue, Miyagi pulls away, startled.

I yearn for the vanished warmth and attempt to close the distance, but she pushes my shoulder firmly.

"...I was jealous."

Beyond the reach for a kiss, her small voice is heard.

Yet, her words form no shape.

They merely drift in, holding no tangible meaning, echoing in my mind.

I lower my gaze, staring at the crocodile’s back, and reprocess each word I heard into clarity.

"...Eh?"

Jealous.

That's definitely what she said.

Though written clearly in my mind, it's odd. Miyagi would never say

such a thing.

Jealousy?

For Miyagi to direct such feelings toward me?

It might be my imagination.

Or perhaps it's a jealousy unrelated to me at all. The words I thought of earlier form a meaning I dared not imagine or attribute to Miyagi.

"Sorry. Can you say that again?"

“...Sendai-san, you belong to me, right?”

She doesn’t repeat what I wanted to hear, but instead, voices something else entirely.

“That’s right.”

“Then why are you choosing things for someone who's not me? Is it because you like picking clothes?”

“Eh?”

“For someone who belongs to me, don’t choose things for anyone else. It annoys me.”

“Eh?”

“I’m done with what I wanted to say, so leave.”

“Eh?”

It’s not that I won’t say anything besides “Eh,” but rather, that’s all I can articulate.

The confusion is justifiable, given the incomprehensible situation.

Summarizing Miyagi’s words reveals that just as I felt jealousy towards Utsunomiya, Miyagi also felt jealousy toward Utsunomiya. Just like how I was envious of Mio, Miyagi felt envious of Kikyo-chan. It’s unbelievable and unexpected, yet apparently true. Miyagi

saying such things wasn't something I foresaw, leading my thoughts to become entangled like crossed wires.

Thus, I'm unable to determine whether the conclusion I've reached is correct.

Her mood soured because I was choosing clothing for Utsunomiya.

My mind isn't equipped to readily accept that as reality. It sounds more like a bad joke, flooding my mind with more "Eh?"

"Sendai-san, how long are you going to stay here?"

Miyagi's voice is dripping with displeasure.

I dispel the cloud of "Eh's" clogging my thoughts, gently touching her earlobe, lightly pressing against her earring.

"Miyagi. From now on, for anyone other than you—"

"You don't need to promise you won't do it."

Interrupting my words, Miyagi says coldly, slapping the hand that touches her earring.

"It's impossible. Don't make promises you can't keep, now go back to your room."

My shoulders are urged insistently, but I can't leave just yet.

"Wait. I have something to say too."

"What?"

"It's the same for me. I was jealous of Utsunomiya too."

While I can't express my love, I can at least admit this.

"You're lying."

"It's true, so please let me choose Miyagi's clothes from now on."

If she won't allow me to promise never to pick clothes for anyone else, then I want to promise to always choose for Miyagi. Moreover,

I wish for her to always claim me as hers.

Such a request is trivial.

It isn't difficult.

But Miyagi replied curtly, “No.”

“I promise to make you look cute.”

“You don’t need to say things like that.”

“Then, what do you want me to say, Miyagi?”

“There’s nothing I want you to say, so just be quiet.”

With that, Miyagi left a mark on my neck—in a place visible to anyone.

Chapter 89

It's Not Going Well Because of Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 261

When I wake up, Earth will explode.

That's what I was thinking, but Earth won't just explode like that. Well, it might someday, but it's certainly not today.

To begin with, I never even slept, so assuming I wake up is meaningless. To even talk about waking up, one must first fall asleep.

That's why. That's why.
I want to sleep quickly.
But I can't sleep.

Today was the worst, so I just want to sleep and forget everything.

Meeting Maika is enjoyable.
But when Sendai-san joins in, the feelings shift away from pure joy.
I didn't expect today to be particularly fun, but it turned out worse than I imagined.

On days like this, it's best to sleep it off and forget. But an hour passes, then two, and still, I can't sleep. Despite being in bed, sleep is incredibly distant, and my eyes are wide awake.

"...It's all Sendai-san's fault."

Glaring at the small nightlight illuminating the room, I let out a deep sigh.

Frustrating.
So persistently frustrating.
I shouldn't have said that.

—That I was jealous.

Sendai-san kept pestering me to say what I wanted, so unnecessary thoughts flooded my mind, leading me to say things I didn't need to. It ended up sounding as if I said it grudgingly, giving it a sense of deeper meaning. While there was no lie in admitting I was jealous, I didn't intend to add any weight beyond the words themselves.

Jealousy is something anyone feels.
It's not a big deal.
It's troublesome if seen as exaggerated.

A roommate feeling jealousy isn't odd, nor is it something to hide; that's why I said it.

It wasn't anything special.

Yet, because I voiced it at an odd moment, something trivial that anyone would feel got blown out of proportion.

It's all, all because of Sendai-san.

She was so persistent, I've ended up with a mind swirling to the point where I can't sleep.

Taking a small breath, I slowly inhale.
Lying in bed, I practice deep breathing, actively trying to expel unnecessary thoughts from my mind.

The word "jealousy" carries only as much weight as being in a good or bad mood. It's only significant if you pay attention to it, but if you forget, it becomes another irrelevant occurrence of the past.

On the bed lit by an orange glow, I grab onto the plush toy that Sendai-san insistently named "Roro" and lightly tap its head.

"Go into Sendai-san's dream and erase her memory, will you?"

Placing the black cat by the wall, I close my eyes, asking it.

Forsaking the elusive lure of sleep, I resolutely keep my eyes shut, trying to lull myself into slumber by trapping darkness behind my eyelids. But the drowsiness doesn't come. Still, I refuse to open my

eyes, waiting, waiting for time to pass.

Minutes, perhaps hours, slip by, and when I check my phone, barely any time has passed. I close my eyes once more and check the phone again after a while.

Repeating this cycle, morning arrives, sleep eluding me still.
When I draw the curtains, a lackluster sky greets me.

The blue sky is obscured by clouds.

Sighing at the gray expanse, I roll onto my side.
I aimlessly lie in bed, but there's nothing to do. Resigned, I get up timidly and open the door to peer into the shared space.

No one is there.
I head to the sink, brush my teeth, and wash my face.
After changing clothes in my room, I return to the shared space again.

Sendai-san isn't there.
I have no idea when she'll wake up, but she is nowhere to be seen.
As I debate whether to make her breakfast, I open the refrigerator.
Suddenly, a slight clatter catches my attention, and I turn to see Sendai-san standing in front of her room.

"...Morning."

After greeting her, not loudly nor softly, I close the refrigerator.

"Oh, um, morning."

Her reply is hesitant and noncommittal.

"Breakfast?"
"Uh… I don't think so."
"Why not? You always eat breakfast."
"Yeah, but…"

She stands there ambiguously smiling, not approaching me like normal. Typically, she'd come closer without me having to call her, but today, she stays distant.
Apparently, Roro didn't complete the task I entrusted it with.

"Are you feeling unwell?"

Although her eyes look sleepy, her complexion doesn't appear bad. She's dressed, not in her usual sweatpants for pajamas, but in a generously-sized pullover and skirt. Still, I ask out of caution, to which she replies, "I'm not unwell." Yet, she doesn't move from the doorway. So, I decide to move instead, stepping away from the refrigerator.

"Miyagi, where are you going?"

Sheets of gray rain clouds hint at a storm as I head toward the door.

"For a walk."
"A walk? Without a coat?"
"Is that a problem?"
"What about breakfast?"
"You said you're not eating, right?"
"I'm not eating, but you could."
"I'm fine."

Eating alone isn't appealing. I don't particularly desire a walk, but I don't feel like lingering around Sendai-san, who seems distant.

"It's going to rain."
"It's alright if it does."

I already know from the gray clouds I saw through the window earlier.

"You'll catch a cold. Why don't you go for a walk when the weather is nicer?"
"I'm not like you, I won't catch a cold."

Still, I reckon wearing a coat might be a good idea.
Even though March is approaching, it's not really warm yet.

"...I'll take a coat, just in case."

As I consider grabbing a coat for a walk I'm not excited about, my eyes meet with Sendai-san's.

"Miyagi."

Her small voice reaches me as she takes a step forward, then hesitates.
Today, Sendai-san is moodier than a sky that won't show its blue.

It's not fun when she's like this.

I step closer, close enough to touch her if I extend my arm, and glance at her neck.
There, the mark I left yesterday is visible.

It really ticks me off.

I wish she would have covered it today.
Seeing it brings yesterday's self back to memory.

"Isn't it visible?"

I touch the mark left yesterday, without specifying what I'm referring to.

"It's okay. It's just Miyagi here."
"Aren't you going out somewhere?"
"Are you really going for a walk?"

Her inquiry bounces back, and in response, I mildly kick her foot. I avert my gaze from the visible mark and open the door to my room, only to hear her voice again.

"I'll come with you, so I'll grab a coat too."
"Even though it might rain?"

I have no desire to accompany Sendai-san, who still seems distant.

"I'll bring an umbrella."
"Don't you want to hide your neck?"
"If you want me to, I'll cover it."
"What if I say don't hide it?"
"I'll leave it as is."

Sendai-san always tells lies.

I'm sure she never really intended to accept my "don't hide it" suggestion. She'll likely change into a turtleneck while fetching her coat, and by the time she emerges from the room, the mark I left

will surely be hidden.

I wanted her to hide the mark today, but if she covers it after I say not to, that would irritate me too. Instead of heading to my room, I stand before Sendai-san.

Tracing the mark with my fingertips, I bite into her neck.
Firmly, deliberately, as if leaving a permanent mark. Her well-kept hair emits a sweet scent. Although it should be the same fragrance as mine, it feels distinctly different.

I grab her clothes, pulling her closer.
To overpower the intensified sweet aroma, I dig my teeth into her soft flesh with the intention of tearing.

I bite hard enough that she would typically cry out in pain, yet Sendai-san remains silent. Instead, her fingers dig into my arm.
I step on her foot, releasing my lips from her neck.

"If it hurts, just say it hurts. What's with you today?"
"It's nothing, really."
"If it's nothing, then act normal."
"...I am acting normal."
"You're not. Something's off. Yesterday, you made it seem like I said something meaningful."

Seeing her so out of character makes me doubt whether she took my unnecessary words too seriously and added a deeper meaning on her own.

"Well, but—"
"See, you're saying 'but' again today. I didn't say anything significant, so just act normal. It pisses me off when you act weird."

"I'm sorry. What should I do?"
"Don't go for a walk and make us breakfast. I don't feel like cooking today."
"Alright."
"Then let's eat together, and do whatever you want afterward."

Like usual.
Everything is fine as long as she spends the day normally. If she does, what happened yesterday can become something insignificant. From now on, whether I get jealous of Maika or even a tutoring

student, I won’t bring it up with Sendai-san.

"Whatever I want? Even if it means going out together?"
"If you want to go out, go by yourself."
"You're not going anywhere, Miyagi?"
"No. And I won't watch movies with you either. I want to spend today alone in my room. Don't come in."

I make things clear before she tries to push her luck.

"What about lunch and dinner?"
"We'll eat together."
"Got it. —And a kiss?"
"Not necessary."
"You want me to act normal with you, right?"
"...That's true."

Indeed, kisses have ceased to be out of the ordinary.
But when did they become so normal?
I don't know.
Before I realized it, they had become something we did regularly.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san's fingertips touch my lips, interrupting my thoughts.
Before I can shut my eyes, she closes the space with a kiss.

It's Not Going Well Because of Sendai-san (II)

Part 262

The blue skirt that Sendai-san picked hasn't seen the light of day.

Part of it is because I've been lazing around at home, but since purchasing the skirt, there haven't been any outings, so it's remained in the closet.

With a sigh, I close the closet door.

The skirt hanging next to the blue one, which I received during the school festival, has had its fair share of outings. It was only useful because Sendai-san made a point of saying she bought it for me, but I think it served its purpose.

Although the blue skirt was also chosen by her, I was the one who purchased it. Therefore, there's no need to force its use, but it irritates me that Sendai-san makes no effort to create an occasion for it.

Even if she's asked me to go somewhere, I'm not planning to go out, but it's not interesting that she hasn't said anything at all.

"I told you to act normal."

Despite it being quite some time since then, Sendai-san has gotten no closer to being her usual self; she just continues to kiss me indiscriminately. Normally, she'd insist on going out somewhere together, or at least suggest a trip to the convenience store, but she's just been docilely staying home.

Although she acts as if everything is normal, smiling away as if nothing's unusual, it just doesn't sit right with me.
I lay down on the bed.

I'm so bored, I could die.

I dramatically type out a message on my phone and send it to Maika. Normally, she responds right away, but not today. With no other choice, I grab a manga from the bookshelf. I'm halfway through when my phone chimes, and I put the manga on the pillow to answer it.

"I was having lunch."

Maika's cheerful voice comes through.

"A bit late, isn't it?"

It's long past lunchtime and nearing snack time.

"I had breakfast late. When you have no plans, it's tough to get up early."
"I get that. On my days off, I just want to lounge around."
"Yesterday, I got up at lunchtime."
"I at least wake up in time to have breakfast."
"Isn't it more like Sendai-san wakes you up?"
"I get up on my own."

Even during spring break, Sendai-san doesn't skip meals. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are like clockwork, so we eat together.

"Oh, hey, you have someone to keep you company when you're bored."

Maika suddenly seems to remember something and adds, "Right there."

"Where?"
"Isn't Sendai-san at your house? Is she out today?"
"She's in her room."
"Oh, did you two have another fight?"
"No, and I'm not in the wrong."

Not knowing what's on Maika's mind, but not wanting to hear any suggestions about apologizing, I nip that notion in the bud. Besides, Sendai-san and I don't really have fights.

"I haven't even said anything yet."
"I said it first because it seemed like you might."
"Jumping the gun like that makes you sound like someone who has

a guilty conscience."

Her voice on the other end sounds like she's slyly smiling.

"Maika, you always paint me as the villain. Sometimes Sendai-san makes mistakes too, you know."
"Maybe, but I'm betting Shiori does wrong more often."

I don't know when or where this image of Sendai-san as a saint was created in Maika's mind, but it seems overly perfect.

Certainly, she's not a bad person.
But she's not so flawless that if we argued, it would undoubtedly be my fault.

She kisses me without asking and tries to make weird promises. She may give off a pure and innocent vibe, but she's also an erotic demon.

I could tell Maika about this different side of Sendai-san to change her image, but I can't. Doing so would change not just her view of Sendai-san but also her view of me.

Telling her everything might also make it clear that Sendai-san is mine, that the clothes Maika wears are chosen by my Sendai-san when we go out, and that even if she walks beside Maika, she's still mine.

If only I could say it right now...

"Hey, Shiori?"

Maika’s voice snaps me out of my unrealistic thoughts, and I hurriedly reply.

"What?"
"You just suddenly went quiet."
"Sorry. Speaking of which, the live show you went to with Asakura-san was amazing, wasn't it?"

I swallow the words I shouldn't say and steer the conversation back to something from a few days ago.

"Yeah, they played a lot of songs I liked. You should've come,

Shiori."
"But I don't play that game."

Asakura-san sometimes invites me to events related to anime or games. Sometimes I go, sometimes I don't. This time, it was a game-related event; Maika went because her favorite voice actor was appearing, but I didn't.

At the live show, Maika went in clothes picked by Sendai-san and later messaged me that Asakura-san had complimented her outfit. Even now, Maika's gushing about the clothes chosen by Sendai-san on the other end of the call.

Words I thought I had swallowed rise back up to my throat.
I consciously choose different words to prevent the ones I shouldn't say from slipping out.

When I no longer know how long I've been listening to Maika's story, there's a knock on the door, followed by Sendai-san's voice, "Miyagi, is now a good time?"

"Sorry, Sendai-san's calling me."

I convey this to the person on the other end before getting down from the bed.

"Alright, I'll hang up then. Just don't fight with Sendai-san, okay?"
"I won't. Talk soon."

I hang up after hearing Maika's "talk soon," and open the door to find Sendai-san standing with a smartphone.

"Mio wants to talk to you."

"Komatsu-san—"

Just as I'm about to ask why, a loud "Heyyy" booms from the smartphone. It's the kind of voice that makes me regret ending the call with Maika. I glare at Sendai-san, who has the phone pointed my way.

No one told me there was a call in progress.

"Shiori-chan, I told you to call me by my first name, not my last!"

Her unnecessarily cheerful voice echoes. When we met at the café, she indeed asked for that, and I intended to comply but forgot, as there's usually no need to call her "Mio-san" in Sendai-san's presence.

"...Hello, Mio-san."

Although she's not someone I actively wish to befriend, I opt to call her by name to avoid complications in the future.

"So stiff. Loosen up, will you? Heyyy, Shiori-chan."
"...Hey."

"Yeah, that's more like it. So, about the main topic: is it okay if I come over to your house tomorrow?"

The shock of her words is enough to wipe away any memory of being forced to say "Hey," and as I glance at Sendai-san's face, she presses her hands together in a gesture of apology, as if the words "I'm sorry" are scrawled across her forehead. This isn't her idea, I gather, but knowing that doesn't make me any happier.

"We agreed on March, so I was thinking tomorrow might be a good option."
"Uh, well..."

While I did say March would be fine, and although it is already March, this is moving too quickly. Only a few days have passed since the month began.

"Oh, is it too sudden? How about the day after tomorrow?"

"The day after..."

It's still too soon. This is too abrupt.

"It gives you more time than tomorrow, right?"

"What about Sendai-san's schedule—"

"Oh, Hazuki said anytime is fine. Right?" Mio-san cuts in, taking over my sentence.

“Yes, I’ll fit my plans around you two,” Sendai-san replies.

“Shiori-chan, it’s okay, right?”

Without any real option to choose another day, I reply, “Then, the day after tomorrow.”

“Great! It's settled, the day after tomorrow.”

“Mio, what time?”

“Hmm, is the afternoon okay?”

“Sure, but what time specifically?”

“I'll let you know later. So, it’s a plan.”

With that, Mio-san's voice fades, and the call ends.

"...What was that just now?"

I give Sendai-san’s leg a nudge, and she responds lightly.

“Isn’t it fine? The day after tomorrow.”

“It’s not fine.”

“Whether now or later, Mio will still come over, so it’s just easier to have her come sooner.”

“I get that, but... I shouldn’t have hung up on Maika.”

Comparing the calls with Maika and with Mio-san, I'd rather have dealt with the uncomfortable conversation with Maika than be railroaded into agreeing to such an abrupt visit from Mio-san.

“You were talking to Utsunomiya?”

“We were on the phone, but I hung up.”

“Sorry. ...What were you talking about?”

She’s apologizing, but Sendai-san’s voice is lower than usual. She doesn’t sound upset, but it isn’t her usual bright tone.

“She told me about the concert she went to with Asakura-san.”

“I didn’t hear about that. Did you go to a concert with Asakura-san, Miyagi?”

“No, Maika went. I was invited, but I didn’t go.”

“You were invited?”

“What's with the interrogation?”

“I didn’t know about it.”

That’s true. I haven’t told Sendai-san.

If I had decided to go to the concert, I would have mentioned the outing to Sendai-san, including Asakura-san. Since I didn’t go, it wasn't worth sharing.

“There was no need to tell you, Sendai-san.”

“There is. I want to know who Miyagi talks to and what about.”

“Why? It doesn’t matter who I talk to or what we talk about.”

I don’t know everything about whom Sendai-san talks to and what she talks about either. Although I’m curious, I choose to remain ignorant.

Since becoming roommates, we’ve established a few rules. However, there's no rule about sharing conversations with others. Even if we were to revisit those rules, I wouldn’t incorporate such a stipulation.

If I knew everything that piqued my curiosity, I’d likely become even more intrigued by Sendai-san and have an increasing number of things I want to learn. The growing list of potential jealousy targets would become unmanageable and frightening.

“It’s not okay. I want to know everything Miyagi talks about.”

“It’s strange to share everything I talked about with friends.”

“Even if it’s strange, I want to know.”

“Why?”

“...Would you believe me if I said it's because I’d feel jealous otherwise?”

Sendai-san and I are different. Even if she knows everything, she won’t be jealous. That's probably why she insists on knowing whom I talk to and what I talk about when she’s not around.

“...I wouldn’t believe it.”

With my terse reply, Sendai-san doesn't push the matter further.

Chapter 90

I Want to See Only Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 263

I didn't actually ask her to wear it.
But even without asking, when I opened the door that had been knocked on, there was Miyagi, wearing the blue skirt I had picked out.

"Sendai-san, about Mio—"

The words she started saying stopped halfway through.
Wondering why, I looked at Miyagi's face and saw a furrow in her brow.

"What?"

I hadn't intended to stare at her so intently, but her low voice came through as if she were displeased.

"Oh, uh, it's nothing. So, did something happen with Mio?"

The skirt suits you.
You look cute.
Let me do your makeup.

Simple words like those just wouldn't come out. Ever since hearing Miyagi use the word "jealousy," I've been at a loss on how to interact with her. Though I want to be my usual self, my actions only end up being awkward and unnatural.

Could it be that Miyagi thinks about me more than I expected, or that she might even be considering a relationship beyond roommates?

Thoughts like those whirl around in my head, making what should be easy words difficult to say and making natural smiles a rarity.

"When are you picking up Mio-san?"

The word "Mio-san" that Miyagi said hit me right in the head. I know that if I don't act normally, it will only make Miyagi wary, but right now, I can't act normally, so it's not a good word for me to hear.

I swallow down the sigh that threatens to escape.

I can let it slide because she added the honorific. Despite feeling unsettled, the use of "san" softens it as I've tolerated before, so I should allow Miyagi to call her "Mio-san." I can't stay as my unusual self forever.

"Mio's coming here on her own, so I'm not picking her up."
"She's coming all the way here by herself?"
"Yeah, there's no one but Mio coming today, so it'd be strange if she wasn't alone."

I look at Miyagi.
Today, she's wearing the blue skirt I chose for her.
That alone is enough to satisfy me.

"That's not what I mean. Wouldn't it be better to pick her up?"
"It'll be fine."

I've already sent Mio a map with directions to this house. She isn't directionally challenged, and in case she gets lost, she's the type to ask someone nearby for directions, so there's no need for worry.

"What if she doesn't come on time?"
"It's not an area where she'd get lost, she'll be fine."
"I'm not worried about her getting lost."
"Then what are you worried about?"
"Mio-san seems like the type to say she'll come at two but just turn up at one or three. Doesn't she always seem to have an hour of leeway?"

The promised time with Mio is two o'clock. There's still more than an hour, so I'd like to say let's wait leisurely, but Miyagi's concerns aren't entirely off the mark.

"She is that type for sure, but I'll let her know it causes trouble if

she's too early or too late. Meanwhile, come on in."

I invited Miyagi into the room and picked up my phone. We've had an early lunch, so it wouldn't be a problem if she arrived earlier than expected, and although Noto-senpai, who usually isn't punctual, isn't coming today, since Miyagi seems concerned, I'll send Mio a text.

"Want to sit?"

I suggested to Miyagi, who was wandering around the room restlessly, and put my back against the bed and sit down.

"Sendai-san. I don't really have anything to talk about with Mio-san, so what should I do?"

Miyagi softly said this and sat beside me.

"Mio will just chat away on her own, so just listen to her."
"Is it really okay to just listen?"
"Well, it'd be a problem if you only listened, so at least respond when she asks questions."
"Of course, I know that much."

Miyagi pulled over the platypus tissue box and placed it between us. Then she patted its head softly. Instead of holding Miyagi's hand, I grasped the platypus's paw.

"When's Mio-san staying until?"

Miyagi asked with a hint of displeasure in her voice.

"Who knows, what time indeed."
"Is Mio-san experiencing any stomach ache or headache today?"
"She looked fine this morning."
"Is she ever not well?"
"Not often."

A small sigh escapes from beside me. I get it.

Meeting Mio, who isn't the type Miyagi typically deals with, must be stressful for her. She'd probably prefer to escape if she could, so it's understandable to hope Mio would feel unwell and cancel.

Well, I'm not too thrilled about it myself.

I couldn't easily welcome Utsunomiya coming to this house, and I'd rather not have Mio over either. Even if she's a friend, I don't want to see her here calling Miyagi "Shiori-chan" while Miyagi calls her "Mio-san."

I have countless complaints about her visiting, but if I voice them, I'm sure Mio would pounce on topics I'd rather avoid, so I have no choice but to let her come.

"...Miyagi, just for today, could you call me Hazuki?"
"No, I won't."

Miyagi answers without looking at me.

"Right. Then, what about me calling you Shiori?"

It would be great if even if just one of these wishes could come true. I think so, but I know they won't.

"You don't need to."

I knew it.

If she says she was jealous because of me, she should at least call me by name or let me call her by name. Still, Miyagi truly refuses to be what I hope.

"I'll wait in my room until Mio-san arrives."

Miyagi mutters as she starts to rise. I let go of the platypus's hand and grab Miyagi's arm.

"Stay here and wait."

I felt more swayed by Miyagi's feelings than I expected.

It's cruel of her to say something that makes me think too much and then treat me casually. If she won't call my name or let me call hers, she should at least allow me to stay by her side.

"Why?"
"What do you mean 'why'? It doesn't matter where you wait, right?"

"It's different."

Miyagi pouts unusually when she says this.

"Are you in a bad mood?"

When I tighten my grip on her arm, Miyagi responds in a low voice.

"I am. Let go of my hand."
"Sorry."

Unsure what I'm apologizing for, I softly apologize and let go of the arm I held. Yet, still wanting to touch her, I reach out a hand, only to have the platypus pressed into it. I accept the fluffy tissue cover and place it next to Pen-chan on the bed.

I exhale quietly and look at Miyagi.
Debating whether to reach out to her again.
Uncertain on what to do, I call her, "Miyagi," and she tugs at my blouse.

"…I'll mark you."

Miyagi whispers, moving closer.

"Alright, but not where Mio can see."
"Undo the buttons."

Even though I know she heard me, she doesn't respond to my words. Knowing that repeating myself wouldn't work on Miyagi, I simply ask, "How many?"

"All of them."
"Miyagi, you perv."
"Quiet. Just do as you're told."
"Okay, okay."

I have no intention of resisting, and even if she asked me to remove my skirt, I would comply, answering as if there's no choice. Without hesitation, I undo the buttons from the top, one by one—three in total.

Miyagi's hands smoothly reach forward, naturally pulling the blouse wide open. Her unabashed gaze pierces my chest above the

camisole.

Without speaking, she places her hand atop my chest where touching isn’t strictly necessary just to leave a mark. Moving slowly as if checking for any resistance, she traces the contours of my chest.

It's not direct skin contact.
Between her hand and my chest lay the camisole and bra.
Even so, my heart thuds loudly.

I find myself wishing Mio wouldn't come today.

I picture her getting lost, her phone dying, finding no one to ask for directions, forever unable to reach our house. Without barriers between Miyagi and me, she could freely touch me. If that displeased her, perhaps I'd be bold enough to push her down myself.

I grab Miyagi's hand that roams over my chest.
She raises her face.
Her hand remains steadfast.

As Miyagi leans closer, she presses her lips just below my collarbone. Her body heat warms my skin, melding into my blood as she sucks firmly. I thread my fingers through her similarly scented hair. When her lips move away, they soon reattach, sucking again.

Even if it's not seen, it's clear.
On my skin is the unmistakable mark proclaiming that I belong to Miyagi.

She grasps my side through the camisole.
As she tightens her hold, I embrace her, prompting a voice to rise from within my arms.

"What time is it now?"
"What does it matter?"
"It does."

Miyagi pushes against me and asks again, "What time?"

I release her from my embrace, pick my phone up from the table, and check the display.

"One-seventeen."

As I say these words, my phone rings with a message from Mio, saying she's nearby.

"See, she's arriving at just any random time, as expected."
"I'm sorry. Can we continue this after Mio leaves?"

I ask while buttoning my blouse.

"There won’t be any continuation."

Miyagi responds in a more disgruntled tone than before.

I Want to See Only Miyagi (II)

Part 264

"Aloha"

The moment the door opens, Mio's voice reverberates in my ears.

"Aloha"

I respond with the same word in the same tone, and Mio looks slightly disappointed as she steps inside and closes the door.

"Where's Shiori-chan?"

"Shiori-chan is over there."

I deliberately use her name to answer, pointing towards the back where Miyagi—who had been disgruntled by the intercom ringing earlier than expected—is waiting for Mio in my room.

"Mio, it's fine to arrive early, but isn't over thirty minutes too soon?"

"I thought so too, so I did send a heads-up."

"Still, it's early."

I'm grateful for the advance notice about arriving early, but if she can be that thoughtful, I wish she'd spend that time elsewhere first.

Had she shown up just twenty, or even ten minutes later, Miyagi and I might have had more time together to indulge in certain... activities. If not, there still would have been more time for affection.

"I headed out early to search for the cat Hazuki's fond of."

Mio says in an innocent tone.

"Did you find her? Mike-chan?"

"Yeah, Mike-chan."

As she mentions the name of the calico cat I named, Mio hands me a bag that's starkly different in color from Mike-chan. Looking inside, I find snacks—a sign she stopped by a convenience store.

"I got tired of looking for Mike-chan, so I ended up at the convenience store and then came straight here."

"Thank you."

Despite being considerate enough to bring a gift, Mio can't manage the simple act of arriving on time. "This way to the room," I gesture, and she replies with, "Excuse me." After waiting for her to remove her shoes and coat, the two of us proceed to the shared space.

"Wow, it's like this, huh."

Telling the curious Mio that there's nothing particularly interesting to see, I open the door to my room.

"Mio, Miyagi is waiting."

"Is this Shiori-chan's room?"

"My room."

With that, Mio, full of energy, makes her way inside.

"Shiori-chan. Alo—"

"Mio, that's not really how you usually greet people."

I intercept her words and shut the door.

"Why not? Sometimes it's good to greet like this. Aloha, Shiori-chan."

"…Hello."

"Aw, you should say Aloha there."

"Mio. Enough with the greetings, take a seat."

I lead the cheerful Mio to sit across from Miyagi, hang her coat on a

hanger, and sit diagonally across from Miyagi.

"Is Shiori-chan's room next door?"

"Oh, yes. Next door."

Miyagi responds as if slightly troubled. I can tell she's wary of whatever Mio might say next, yet there's no avoiding it—Mio's words won't change, and neither will Miyagi's inevitable unease.

"I'd like to see Shiori-chan's room later."

Exactly as I anticipated, Mio voices her predictable request, to which I reply on Miyagi's behalf.

"No need, just stay here."

"But I'm asking Shiori-chan."

"It'll probably be the same answer, though."

"Really?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

With a vague reply, Miyagi glances around nervously between Mio and me. Today, she seems like a borrowed cat brought to an unfamiliar place—so unlike her usual, spontaneous stray self when with me or her softer demeanor with Utsunomiya; it's clear she's not comfortable around Mio.

"I guess it can't be helped. I'll just make do with Hazuki's room today," Mio declares cheerfully.

Relaxed in her denim, she seems so at ease it wouldn't be surprising if she claimed to have been visiting here for the past ten years. It's hard to tell who the guest really is.

"By the way, Shiori-chan, do you like dorayaki?"

"Yeah, I quite like it."

I'd never heard anything about Miyagi liking dorayaki, nor have I seen her buy any before. So, her "quite" translates to indifferent at

best—I suspect if I were the one asking, she'd say she doesn't particularly care for it.

"That's good, then. It's a new product, so I bought some. I also got chocolate and potato chips."

"Thanks."

Miyagi's voice carries a public politeness. Had I spent my high school years without visiting Miyagi's place, I'd likely be met with the same reaction as Mio. I'd be classified as someone like Mio, missing out on any chance for friendship forever.

Back in my second year of high school, I'm grateful Miyagi spoke to me at the bookstore.

Without that encounter involving five thousand yen, the current state of me being Miyagi's roommate wouldn't exist.

"Mio. Is cold tea alright? We have barley tea, soda, and orange juice."

While arranging Mio's snacks on the table, I call out.

"Then soda, please."

"Miyagi, could you please get it?"

"Sure."

Miyagi agrees with a somewhat relieved expression and exits the room. Ideally, I'd offer to fetch it, but I can't leave. Beyond not wanting to leave Miyagi alone with Mio, I don't wish to add to her discomfort by matching her with someone she clearly struggles with.

If Mio were a little more like someone Miyagi could easily tolerate, perhaps I could make pancakes as I did when Utsunomiya visited. But leaving them alone now might just stress Miyagi right out.

"This room doesn't quite feel like yours, Hazuki," Mio observes as she scans the room.

"Really?"

"Yes. It's more barren than I imagined—but then you have a cute penguin plush and a quirky tissue cover."

"That's a platypus."

I clarify the identity of the animal Mio finds strange.

"What was the name of that odd bird you photographed at the zoo?"

"Shoebill?"

"Yes, that’s it. You took a lot of photos of that, right? When did you start liking quirky animals, Hazuki?"

"I've never become particularly fond of them."

"Then why the platypus?"

Mio points at the tissue cover.

"It's something Miyagi likes. She left it in my room."

I offer a half-truth. Miyagi never declared her love for platypuses, but she did decide on leaving the cover in my room—so it isn't entirely a lie.

"Ah, Shiori-chan's tastes, huh? I see. But even without these, I wouldn't have thought of this room as yours, Hazuki. I'd pictured something more sparkling."

I chuckle at Mio's words. Similar remarks have been made by both Miyagi and Utsunomiya, but to hear it from Mio too was unexpected.

I've always been playing a version of "Sendai Hazuki" that fits in easily among many, and that remains true even now in university. However, I didn't think I was as disconnected from the real me as I was in high school.

But with Mio pointing out that my image differs, it seems I'm still portraying a version of myself quite distant from the "real Sendai Hazuki."

"What kind of room do you mean?" I ask Mio lightly.

"Hard to say exactly, but it's just not what I imagined. And Shiori-chan doesn't fit the image of your roommate either, Hazuki. It's a bit of a mismatch. What's your relationship like?"

"As I've said before, we were high school friends."

I answer, thinking that the gap works both ways.

With her classic bob cut without bangs, she's often perceived as having a cool demeanor, but the moment she speaks, that image shifts—becoming less crisp and more chaotic, like a breeze loudly rustling leaves.

Some say Mio is beautiful until she opens her mouth, but even if she were silent, she'd send telepathic messages to communicate directly with your mind, so she'd never be the quiet beauty type.

"It seemed like you were part of different circles back then too. Shiori-chan wasn't secretly a gyaru in high school or anything, right?"

"No, and that would be terrifying."

It's true that if Miyagi were a gyaru, she might have gotten along quite well with Umina, but that never was the reality. Nor was it ever likely. In any case, if Miyagi were like Umina, I doubt I would have proposed the idea of sharing a room.

"It might make more sense if she were a gyaru, though. Looking at Shiori-chan, it's hard to believe you two are roommates."

"Even if you can't believe it, we are roommates."

"But isn't there a bit of cool distance?"

"In what way?"

"The way you address each other. Why not use first names? I'd think Hazuki would call her Shiori."

Mio brings up something I'd rather not discuss, causing me to press where Miyagi once placed a mark, just below my collarbone.

"I’ve always called her Miyagi."

If I could call her Shiori, I would have long ago. But as it stands, I use "Miyagi" because I’m not allowed to use her first name.

"You usually call your friends by their first names, Hazuki."

"Well, yes, but we were in different groups in high school, so it just stayed as Miyagi."

The chance to change that hasn't come. I don't even know if it ever will. I'm not even allowed to refer to Miyagi as Shiori-chan, as Mio does.

I swallow a sigh and glance at the door, not wanting to continue this conversation with Mio.

Though I asked Miyagi to bring cold drinks instead of hot drinks to ensure she could return quickly, she's taking longer than expected. I contemplate whether to go call her.

"Something wrong, Hazuki?"

Noticing my gaze, Mio looks at the door.

"I'm wondering why Miyagi is taking so long."

Just as I’m about to stand, the door opens, and in comes Miyagi, carrying a tray with three glasses, placing the soda in front of Mio.

"Thank you, Shiori-chan," Mio chirps cheerfully. Miyagi, in an unusually considerate gesture, asks, "Sendai-san, did you want barley tea?"

"Yeah, thank you."

She sets the barley tea before me, and places the last glass in front of Mio, who is already sipping her soda.

"Shiori-chan, why don't you call Hazuki by her given name? Isn't 'Sendai-san' too formal for roommates?"

"Well, since I've always called her Sendai-san, it's just easier that way."

Miyagi, seated across from Mio, speaks in a troubled tone, before sipping what seems to be the same transparent soda as Mio.

"Why not seize this opportunity to call each other by your first names?" Mio suggests.

Though it would be nice, Miyagi remains silent, like a borrowed cat indifferent to the suggestion. Her expression remains vague.

She doesn't want to call me by my name.

Though she didn't explicitly state it earlier, Miyagi's words, "Sendai-san is easier to say," speaks volumes, and even Mio's suggestion doesn't alter that.

"It's hard to change how you address someone suddenly; this is fine for now."

Unwilling but having no choice, I say the necessary words and take a sip of my barley tea.

"Oh come on. What about you, Shiori-chan?"

"Mio, don't pick on Miyagi too much."

"I'm not. I was only trying to improve things between you two, but Hazuki-mama is too protective."

Mio quips playfully, adding, "Right, Shiori-chan?"

"Instead of joking around, how about you eat some dorayaki?"

"Okay, Mama."

"I don't recall giving birth to you."

"Why not be a mom? Then how about a happy little room-share with the three of us?"

Mio glances at Miyagi for agreement. Before she can speak, I immediately shoot down Mio's proposal.

"Let's not make it a family trio. Besides, we don't have an extra room here."

Even as a joke, I don’t want Miyagi to consent to having a third person share our space. Miyagi's only roommate should be me—now and always.

"Hazuki, you’re being cold. Be a bit kinder to Mio-chan," Mio mock-complains, pretending to wipe away tears and letting out an exaggerated whimper that was mildly irritating.

"Be nice and eat the dorayaki," I insist, handing her one from the table.

"Alright, time for a snack," Mio agrees, smiling brightly.

Chapter 91

Sendai-san Lacks Marks (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 265

I know I come across poorly, even to myself. Yet, I can't seem to respond smoothly or maintain a friendly demeanor.

It's not that I dislike Mio-san; I just can't keep up with her vibe. Watching Sendai-san constantly chatting with Mio-san doesn't exactly put me in a cheerful mood.

As I watch Mio-san happily bite into a dorayaki, I sigh inwardly.

"Shiori-chan, have one too."

A cheerful voice calls out from across the table. I reply with a simple "Okay," then reach for a dorayaki. Regret hits me almost instantly.

If only I had added just one more word to my response.

It might not have improved the atmosphere, but it could've brightened things up a bit. I open the package of the dorayaki, which apparently contains custard cream instead of the usual red bean paste, and take a bite.

It's sweet and delicious. Not exactly dorayaki-like, though.

"Mio, isn't this too sweet?"

Sendai-san's voice rings out, prompting Mio-san to lightly reply, "Isn't it just fine? What do you think, Shiori-chan?" directing the question at me.

"I think it's just right."
"See? Hazuki, you lose."
"Miyagi, back me up here."
"Shiori-chan is on my side, right?"

"Um, well, it's not really about sides..."

What should I say next?

I'm caught up on Mio-san's insistence that I call her by her first name and drop the formalities. It bothers me, along with the fact that Sendai-san is only talking with Mio-san, leaving my words stuck.

"Hazuki, just admit you lost quietly."
"Well, if we're going by majority, then I lose."

Sendai-san speaks lightly and takes a bite of her dorayaki, while Mio-san drinks her soda with satisfaction. Their conversation touches on things that happened over spring break and topics related to university.

Occasionally, Mio-san seeks my input, so I can't just tune out their conversation. I try to chime in at the right times, but each attempt feels more burdensome than the last.

I can't respond well. It feels like I'm souring the atmosphere. It seems I have no place here.

No, that's not it.

The one who isn't needed is—

No, that's going too far.

If only Mio-san had arrived as planned. If she had come thirty minutes later as scheduled, I would have been able to "mark" Sendai-san more.

Marks are like medicine—the more there are, the more I can relax. If I could remain calm like a serene sea, rather than being agitated, I could handle situations better and avoid having a regretful time like this.

"So, Shiori-chan, let's go out for a meal sometime."

Mio-san suggests brightly, opening a bag of potato chips after finishing her dorayaki.

"Mio, 'meal' as in what?"

Before I can ask, for some reason, Sendai-san interjects.

"A meal is a meal. I'll invite other friends too, let's all eat together. How about it, Shiori-chan?"
"Who are these friends exactly?"

I'm not keen on joining for a meal, but declining straight away seems harsh, so I ask about the kind of people who would be there.

"Well, it's what you'd call a meetup, you know. Aren't you interested? If you tell me your type, Shiori-chan, I'll invite that kind of person."
"Mio, stop inviting people to those kinds of gatherings so freely."
"Oh, come on. Shiori-chan, don't you want a boyfriend?"
"I'm not really interested."

I'm not interested in getting a boyfriend. My thoughts are more concerned with Sendai-san. Considering how Mio-san easily invites others, it's unlikely she wouldn't invite Sendai-san, too.

I tightly grip the blue skirt that Sendai-san chose for me.

Sendai-san is mine, yet there are so many things I don't know about her. If Mio-san invites her to these gatherings, and she's out enjoying herself with someone I don't know, I'd never know if she didn't tell me.

Sendai-san rarely comes home late except for work, but it's not unheard of. So, it's not impossible she attends such events.

"Oh, 'not really,' huh. You should at least pretend to agree with Hazuki here."

I look away from Mio-san's disappointed voice and focus on Sendai-san.

"Sendai-san, do you go to these gatherings?"
"Not really."
"Hazuki, you're really not sociable, are you? You should come sometime."

Mio-san sighs as she makes her point to the straightforward

response from Sendai-san.

"Well, maybe when I'm free."
"You say that, but Hazuki, you're never really free."
"I'm quite busy."
"You should make some time."

Sendai-san responds to the discontented voice by promising to "look into it."

I can't tell how much of this conversation is true. Yet, Sendai-san's claim of "not really" and Mio-san's assertion of "not sociable" both feel misleading.

That's because neither matches the Sendai-san I know.

"...Back in high school, Sendai-san, didn't you and Ibaraki-san go to those kind of events?"

The words I had been pondering slip out unexpectedly.

I never witnessed Sendai-san interacting with boys, but I've seen her discussing such topics in class with Ibaraki-san. So, I shouldn't be wrong.

"What, Hazuki was sociable in high school?"

Mio-san's voice, tinged with surprise, echoes in the room.

From that voice, I understand that her earlier words about Sendai-san were not lies. But it doesn't make me happy. I didn't want to know that they are close enough that they can maintain a friendship without such gatherings or sociability.

"It wasn't really that I was sociable; it was just that I had no reason to refuse."

As I expected, Sendai-san doesn't deny the past.

"So I'm someone you can easily refuse?"
"That's not it, but I am busy."
"Alright, I'll work hard to raise my priority ranking with you, Hazuki. I'll beat Ibaraki somehow."

I wish Mio-san were more like Ibaraki-san to Sendai-san. Right now, the Sendai-san I see is closer to the one when she's with me.

This kind of Sendai-san is not the real her.

The Sendai-san with others was always so amiable and kind, almost to the point of being a people-pleaser. Yet, the Sendai-san with Mio-san seems more honest, albeit not as freely outspoken as with me.

I don’t want to see this side of Sendai-san.

"Don't worry, Mio. Your priority ranking is quite high."

My Sendai-san says something I’d rather not hear, smiling softly.

Sendai-san shouldn't create any rankings. She belongs to me, and I believe there shouldn’t be space for anyone else.

"Quite high? That's pretty harsh, you know."
"It's not harsh. Don’t worry."
"Alright then, let's definitely go out for that meal. Shiori-chan, you’re in, right?"

Mio-san, who was joking with Sendai-san, now turns a cheerful smile on me.

"Mio. Like I said, I'm not interested in meeting new people."

Before I could answer, Sendai-san responds. I feel like she's been taking the words right out of my mouth all day.

It's not that I have an overwhelming desire to talk with Mio-san, but it's frustrating that Sendai-san keeps interrupting and trying to engage in conversation with her. Even though it saves me from having to answer awkward questions, it makes me want to complain. To put it bluntly, I don't want them to carry on a conversation without me.

I know exactly what this feeling is.

—Jealousy.

Once I became aware of this emotion, it seems there's no weighing it down. Even when I try to sink it to the depths of my heart, it floats

back up, reminding me of how I'm really feeling. It forces me to recognize that I'm overwhelmed by petty emotions, despite not wanting to acknowledge it.

"We're three people, so it's fine. Shiori-chan, you're okay with it if it's the three of us, right?" Mio-san directs her words at me.

"Yeah."

I answer briefly. Imagining the three of us having a meal together irritates me. I hate imagining Sendai-san and Mio-san enjoying a lively conversation. I'm irritated. So irritated.

I find myself jealous of Mio-san, who is chatting happily with my Sendai-san, both now and in any future scenario. I'm also frustrated with myself for feeling this way.

But there's no place to offload these emotions.

All I can do is stare at the floating word "jealousy" in my heart, and it's painful. I wish I could just discard this feeling somewhere. Like a cat coughing up a furball, if only I could expel it and then cocoon myself in my room.

If I can't do that, I have half an urge to shove a plush penguin into Mio-san's mouth to seal it shut.

I look at the blue earrings on Sendai-san. It's not enough just to be on her ears. The red marks I made before Mio-san arrived aren't enough, either. I should have made more. I should have placed them where Mio-san could see them, too.

The spots I marked in red are my territory; they don't belong to Mio-san. Had I stuck to that silly notion, I wouldn't find myself wanting to shove plush toys into someone's mouth.

"Shiori-chan," Mio-san calls out, chasing away the foolish thoughts that had filled my head. But I have no idea what they've been talking about. I hadn't been listening.

"Do you tend to furrow your brow?"

"Eh?"

I instinctively touch my brow with my fingers. I hadn't been aware of it, but I might have been frowning due to the less-than-pleasant thoughts running through my mind. If so, I must have looked displeased, and that wouldn't be fair to Mio-san.

"You were making such a serious face, like you were thinking hard about something," Mio-san says brightly, playfully tapping her own brow.

"Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about what to make for dinner," I say, trying to force a smile.

"Is that so? Well, since we're here, why don't the three of us have dinner together?"

Even though time can't be turned back, I can't help but regret what I've just said.

"The wrinkle between Shiori-chan's eyebrows is just like in the photo."

Mio-san says while staring intently at my face.

"Photo?"
"I saw it with Hazuki. Even in that picture, you had a wrinkle between your brows."

I had suspected that Sendai-san might have shown Mio-san a photo. But from the mention of a wrinkle, I can imagine that it's not a particularly flattering picture.

"...What kind of photo did Sendai-san show you?"
"Just an ordinary photo."

Sendai-san answers the question I meant for Mio-san.

"Then, Sendai-san. Show me this 'ordinary' photo."
"Don't worry, it's a cute photo."

Sendai-san smiles unnaturally broadly.

"I don't care if it's cute or not. I'm just curious about the kind of photo it is. Show me the photo you showed to Mio-san."

I do appreciate Sendai-san.

Mio-san suggested we have dinner together, which led to us deciding to eat pizza. Thanks to Sendai-san, we avoided the worst-case scenario.

When Mio-san wanted to eat out and suggested, "Why don't we go now?"—I almost wished for the end of the world. But Sendai-san insisted it was too early for dinner and opted for ordering pizza later, saving the day.

Had we gone out as planned, I was sure Mio-san would have suggested inviting friends over. Having more people like Mio-san around would be too much.

So, I appreciate Sendai-san, but that's a separate issue.

"...I could show you, but..."
"Then show me."

I reach my hand out towards Sendai-san, who is sitting diagonally across from me, but she just looks at me without pulling out her phone.

"Sendai-san."
"...You won't delete the photo, right?"
"If I don't like it, I'll delete it."

As I declare firmly, Mio-san bursts out laughing for some reason.

"Shiori-chan, you're finally coming around."
"Huh?"
"You chatted quite a bit when you came to my workplace, but you're not talking much today."
"That's because..."

Last time, it was because I got swept up in her unrestrained communication style, as if personal space didn't exist.

"You should talk more, it's more fun. Oh, and there's that brow wrinkle again."

Hearing her amused voice, I touch my forehead to smooth the wrinkle. Seeing this, Mio-san laughs again, tempting my brow to furrow once more.

"Shiori-chan, don't you want Hazuki to show you the picture?"

Mio-san asks while chuckling, pointing at Sendai-san.

"Oh, right. Sendai-san, what about the photo?"

Giving up on my brow, I demand Sendai-san take out her phone.

"I'll only show it if you promise not to delete it."

"I'll decide after I've seen it, so hand over your phone."

Just as I say this, Mio-san chimes in.

"No worries, Hazuki said it's really a cute picture. Just as cute as you are now."
"It's not like I'm cute or anything."
"Shiori-chan, you're cute. That skirt looks great on you too."

Mio-san smiles brightly, and before I can refute, Sendai-san interjects.

"I picked out that skirt."
"Oh, did you? But hey, Hazuki, you're so fun with Shiori-chan around."
"Fun? I thought I was just normal."
"Totally fun. Today you're so assertive, jumping into conversations. That's not usually the case, right? And you're flustered over something as small as a photo."
"That's because Mio keeps bothering Miyagi."

Sendai-san mutters under her breath, giving Mio-san a reproachful look.

"That attitude and face make you interesting too. It's rare to see this side of Hazuki. Shiori-chan, is this how Hazuki is at home?"

I hesitate to talk about how Sendai-san truly is when she's with me alone in this house.

The real Sendai-san that nobody knows about, the Sendai-san that's just for me.

The Sendai-san sitting here talking to Mio-san feels close to the real one.
I don't want Mio-san to get any closer to the true Sendai-san.

"Well, how should I put it... probably a little gentler, I guess?"

I offer a vague but not inaccurate response.

"Oh, I just received a good evaluation—but it's still unclear. Isn't she actually an 'Ultimate Selfishness Demon King' instead of gentle?"
"I don't think so."

In response to my answer, Mio-san looks doubtingly at Sendai-san.

"Really?"
"I'm not selfish. Let's drop this topic."

Sendai-san sharply interjects, pushing a bag of potato chips towards Mio-san.

"Alright, alright, I'll stop before Hazuki-mama gets mad."

Mio-san cheerfully says, taking a chip and munching on it. Then, with a laugh, she adds, "I wanted to see more of the interesting side of Hazuki though."

Still, I think—

If seeing the interesting side of Sendai-san is her goal, she didn't need to come all the way here. Though it's rare, spending time together surely provides opportunities to see that side of her.

Though I have my thoughts about Mio-san spending time with the Sendai-san I don't know when I'm not around, it's better than her encroaching on my territory.

Sigh.

After a small exhale, I take a sip of soda.
The syrupy drink with its fading fizz slides down my throat and settles in my stomach. I wonder if I should have gone with barley tea instead, but I take another sip and look at Mio-san, who is cheerfully talking with Sendai-san.

I glance at the glass on the table.
Watching the two of them, my stomach feels heavy.

"This isn't good..."

The words slip from my mouth before I can catch them, and I hold my breath.

But it was quiet enough that they shouldn't have heard.

I cautiously lift my eyes from the glass and meet Mio-san's gaze.

"What isn’t good?"

Mio-san looks at me, serious.

While not as much as Sendai-san, she is beautiful.

It's suddenly striking. She has a frank and cheerful air when she talks, but her features stand out more when she's silent. She's rightly classified as a beauty, looking a little intimidating when quiet.

"Uh, well... I’m not very good at speaking."

Not exactly accurate, but not entirely wrong either, I reluctantly utter the words, and Mio-san starts to laugh light-heartedly.

"No worries, no worries. You’re speaking just fine. Thanks to you, I got to see a silly side of Hazuki today. You both are incredibly fun."

Mio-san says with a voice that is less bright and more gentle, emptying the glass that held soda. She then surveys me and Sendai-san with a soft smile and continues.

"From the moment we met last time, I thought Shiori-chan was an interesting person. I was curious about what it's like for you two to room together, so I decided to visit. I’m really glad I did. I got to see an interesting Hazuki too."

"Mio. I'm not a plaything, you know."

Sendai-san sighs, holding her forehead dramatically.

"I get it. But you two are really funny. It was worth taking the train to come here. I don't usually get to see Hazuki being scolded."

"I wasn't really being scolded, was I?"

Sendai-san retorts with a more serious tone.

"You were, when you showed the photo earlier."

Mio-san giggles. Watching her like this, I can tell she’s a good person. But being a good person isn't enough; it doesn't change the fact that Mio-san is challenging for me to deal with.

Probably, Mio-san isn't the same kind of person as I am. She must be some kind of superhuman or something. If someone said she came from the edge of the universe, I'd believe it. She might even be able to speak without needing oxygen.

Being such a creature that I've never encountered, I feel it'll be difficult to become as close with her as I am with Maika.

"Shiori-chan, do you often scold Hazuki like earlier?"

Her cheerful voice echoes, followed by the sound of a slap as Sendai-san smacks Mio-san. Yet, Mio-san just continues to giggle, standing up with a comment about how even hitting someone is rare.

"Before I get hit any more, I'll escape to the bathroom. Where is it?"

Sendai-san stands up and explains the bathroom location to Mio-san. With a light-hearted "I'll be right back," Mio-san leaves the room.

"Sorry about all the noise, Miyagi."

Sendai-san sits back in her spot, letting out a big sigh.

"It's fine... but you and Mio-san seem pretty close, huh."

I say, pulling a tissue from the back of a stuffed platypus.

"Because we're friends."

"Hmm."

I roll the tissue into a ball and toss it at Sendai-san, who catches it and approaches me.

"In a bad mood?"

Sendai-san sets the tissue ball on the floor and reaches for my hand. Before she can grab it, I rub over the mark I made on her through her clothes.

"...I should've left more."

"Want to add more now?"

"Mio-san will be back soon, it's impossible."

Even if I want to, now's not the time for that kind of thing.
That much is clear.

"Yeah, true."

But thinking about having to watch my Sendai-san and Mio-san—who feels like she's from another world—talk and eat dinner together makes me realize I need something to steady my nerves.

What might that be?

I trace the button of Sendai-san's blouse and press hard on the marked spot.
I want to remove her clothes and touch her directly.
But that's not allowed.

"...Let me have your hand."

I caress her arm and grip her fingertips.

"Sure."

Her soft voice reaches my ears.
I pull her hand and bite her index finger.

The first joint, hard and firm.
I bite so strongly that it leaves a mark.

Sendai-san doesn't complain of pain or dissatisfaction.
Instead, she runs her fingers through my hair with her unbitten hand.

"Sendai-san is mine."

I tell her while wiping her finger marked with my teeth with a tissue.

"I know. Do you want to do the other fingers?"

"No. ...For now, act like you're at university."

I want her to return to being just my Sendai-san, but I don’t want Mio-san to see that.
So for now, show me the Sendai-san that Mio-san knows but I don't.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"If you don't understand, that's okay."

I push her shoulder and throw the tissue into the trash. Then I sit a bit away from her, bite into a potato chip, and swallow. Sendai-san remains silent, as she starts to eat potato chips as well. Just as I reach for my third one, the door opens.

"Mio-chan’s back to treat you to pizza～."

With a bright voice, Mio-san sits across from me.

"Mio is treating us?"

"As an apology for teasing you two. I'll treat you to three or even four, so order whatever you like."

At Mio-san’s words, Sendai-san grabs the pizza leaflet. Using her unmarked hand, she places it on the table, and the pizza discussion begins.

Teriyaki or seafood...?

After some back-and-forth, the pizza arrives a little earlier than dinnertime. Before long, only the boxes remain, and even the ice cream for dessert is reduced to just its wrappers.

Whether biting Sendai-san's finger had any effect is unclear.
My feelings remained unsettled, but maybe it was better than not biting at all.

While contemplating what I'd do if Mio-san decided to stay over, I tidy the table. She calls me, "Shiori-chan," prompting me to brace myself. However, instead of what I expected, she simply says, "I should get going soon," and, like a whirlwind, Mio-san leaves as quickly as she arrived.

Leaving us with the ominous words, "I'll come again."

"Will Mio-san really come again?"

In Sendai-san's room, now just the two of us, I look over at her while leaning against the bed.

"Do you think she won't?"

Instead of answering, I let out a small sigh, and in an unusually weary voice for her, Sendai-san adds, "I don’t think she’ll come back right away."

Sendai-san Lacks Marks (III)

Part 267

"Is Mio-san always like that?"

I quietly ask, glancing to my side. Although Mio-san has left, Sendai-san seems utterly drained. I don't know why she is so exhausted, but it seems best to let her rest soon.

"She was more energetic than usual."

"I see."

There's no point in staying in this room any longer. We're both tired and should return to our respective rooms, but my body refuses to move.

"Could you take out your phone?"

Lingering in this room without a reason, I mumble, offering myself a legitimate reason to stay.

"Phone? Why?"

"The photo you showed Mio-san, Sendai-san. I haven't seen it yet."

Having a reason to ask about it means staying here isn't odd, and simply chatting shouldn't be too burdensome, no matter how tired she is.

"That's so typical of you, Miyagi."

Sendai-san replies warmly, smiling.

"Why won't you show me?"

"Because it's one of those photos I've shown you before. No need to show it again, right? Besides, I'd be troubled if you deleted it."

"…Fine, forget it then."

Though I'd like to erase any strange photos, I realize it's useless now. What's needed to be erased is Mio-san's memory, but since that's not possible, there's no choice but to let it go.

"Miyagi, are you feeling unwell, perhaps?"

Her voice brims with genuine concern.

"Why?"

"Because you backed down surprisingly easily."

I'm taken aback. While I admit I might not be straightforward, I don't think I'm difficult enough to prompt concern over my health just because I said, "Fine, forget it."

"Regardless of what the photo is, Mio-san has already seen it. Mulling over it does no good."

"Then why even bring it up again? Why ask to see it a second time?"

Even if she asks me why, I'm at a loss. I can't say it's because I needed a reason to be here.

"…I forgot why."

I mumble softly, looking at Sendai-san's finger. The bite mark I left while Mio was in the bathroom is gone.

Of course it is. Such marks fade quickly.

I trace her index finger, as if following an invisible bite mark. Though I touch it, I can't find my traces.

Still, the mark should remain. I know it doesn't disappear that easily, but I want to undo her blouse's buttons and check. I want to caress the mark, undress her completely, and make countless new ones.

I want to make her body one that can't be shown to anyone.

But Mio-san is no longer here, rendering such thoughts meaningless.

"I'm going back to my room."

I squeeze Sendai-san's index finger, then let go, only for her to take hold of my hand.

"Why don't you stay the night?"

Before I can get up, she suggests this as if it's nothing.

"This is my house, so there's no such thing as staying over. Didn't we have a similar discussion before?"

"Let's not get caught up in the details. Just sleep here."

"No."

"And the other stuff?"

"What other stuff?"

"What we were doing before Mio came."

Sendai-san says quietly, entwining her fingers with mine. Her grip feels more like holding than grabbing, as if silently urging me.

This level of connection feels too intimate to be mere roommates, and it felt like it gave this conversation a deeper meaning. I attempt to break our joined hands apart, but they stay connected. She holds on firmly, our shoulders brushing together.

"Let's continue."

She whispers in my ear, and I refuse with a quiet "no." Pressing against her shoulder with my free hand, she whispers again.

"Shiori..."

Sendai-san's pleasant voice tickles my ear. I fight back the urge to reach for the buttons of her blouse, biting my lip to resist.

Now isn't the time for such things. If I get drawn into her warmth, the line between roommates and something else may blur irreparably.

Or perhaps it already has, leaving me unsure of my standing. I can only see the marks I've left as if they were signs along the road, yet following them won't bring me back to where I was.

"I haven't said you can call me by my name."

I forcibly pull my hand from hers.

"You're always saying things like that, but will you ever say yes?"

"…I don't know, but not now."

"Then, how about calling me Hazuki?"

"Not now for that, either."

If I call her Hazuki, Maika will also call her Hazuki. That's what Sendai-san said.

I'm not ready to accept that yet. Nor am I ready to accept her calling Maika not by "Utsunomiya" but "Maika." I understand I must eventually, but now isn't the time.

"You can say no to all my requests, but if you reject everything, I might not be able to hold back. ...Can't you allow just one thing?"

"What would make you satisfied?"

When I ask, Sendai-san grabs the hem of my blue skirt, thinking briefly before replying clearly.

"—all of you, Miyagi."

"Sendai-san, you're really stupid. That's more than one thing."

I slap her hand away from my skirt and attempt to stand up. But she seizes my arm, bringing her face close, intending to kiss me as if it were the most natural thing. I ward her off by pushing her shoulder.

"No."

"Miyagi, you seem to think I'll obey whatever you say, don't you? Do you see me as nothing more than a dog?"

Her voice drops a little, tinged with dissatisfaction.

"Sendai-san, you're not a 'dog'; you're my 'possession.'"

"A possession is a lower rank than a dog, isn't it?"

"I think it's treated better than a dog."

"Then show me how something treated better is handled."

Sendai-san presents a challenge. I wouldn't want to make a dog my possession. I want only Sendai-san to be mine. But that doesn't automatically mean she's treated better than a dog.

So, how should I proceed?

I reach out to Sendai-san, who gazes at me as if she's a dog waiting for a treat. Covering her eyes that hold my gaze, I move in to kiss her. Knowing I can't placate her with gestures like this, I match the kiss she attempted earlier and ask, "How about this?"

"Do you think that was enough?"

She moves my hand away, her fingers stroking the back of my hand, pressing hard on my index finger like when I bit hers. Even though she doesn't bite like I did, her insistence that my previous kiss wasn't enough is clear, prompting me to kiss her once more.

Gently brushing against her lips, I pull away. Her fingers draw mine in, and I lightly tease her lips with my tongue.

Her lips part slightly, allowing me to enter. The warmth envelops me as our tongues wrap together, melding into each other with intensity. As our fingers release their grip, all my awareness focuses on the sensation of our tongues intertwining. The palpable heat almost suffocates me. I grip her blouse and pull away, only to hear Sendai-san's voice.

"It's okay to unbutton it. You want to leave a mark, don't you?"

I cast my gaze down at my hands. My fingers clutch the blouse in the very spot where my mark should be placed. By unbuttoning it, I could leave an indelible mark, one that no one else could make but me.

Yet, I know those marks will fade away, like bite marks eventually do.

They won't last forever. And so, I'll find myself marking her again and again, only for those marks to vanish, and I'll have to start over. No matter how many times I do it, it's never enough.

"Miyagi."

Her tender voice calls out to me, prompting me to press my lips against her neck. Sendai-san doesn't push me away. As I softly suck, she wraps her arms around my back, embracing me tightly, and I leave a faint trace on her neck.

"I'm heading back to my room for tonight."

I place a kiss over the visible mark I've made and stand up.

If I stay with Sendai-san much longer, I might end up doing something that would keep her from ever leaving this house.

Since Sendai-san is mine, it's my right to do such things. It's spring break, so making a visible mark isn't particularly troublesome.
But today, that isn't enough.

"Do you really have to?"

I exhale faintly in response to Sendai-san's words.
Today, I want to do something only I can do, and I want to see a version of Sendai-san that only I am allowed to see.

Since Sendai-san is mine, it's my right to do such things. It's spring break, so nothing would be too concerning.

However, she's not a dog that follows orders without question.
I need to respect her wishes as well.

What I want shouldn't be pursued without her consent, and words are necessary to gain that consent.

"...I have to."

Unlike the first time I touched her, I can't bring myself to express

my selfish desires or touch her without hesitation. Right now, I'm at a loss for words.

"Then, take this and sleep with it."

With that, Sendai-san hands me the penguin lying on the bed.

"Can’t I just take it with me without sleeping with it?"

"No, you have to sleep with it. And then lend me a replacement for my dear Pen-chan."

Grabbing my arm, she leads me out of her room. For the smiling Sendai-san waiting at my room door, I fetch the empty crocodile tissue box holder from my room.

"Here you go."

I hand the floppy crocodile to Sendai-san in front of my door.

"That’s not Roro-chan."

"If you don't want the crocodile, I won't lend anything."

The black cat plushie has the duty of protecting my sleep, so I can't give it to Sendai-san.

"The crocodile is fine."

Without hesitation, Sendai-san claims and strokes the crocodile's head.

Chapter 92

Things I Want Miyagi to Do (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 268

Pen-chan hasn't come back. It's been days since then, and it still hasn't returned.

Instead, there's an empty shell of a crocodile-themed tissue cover sitting on my bed. I give a kiss to its soft, drooping snout. Truly, I have no idea what Miyagi is thinking.

A penguin plushie for Miyagi, in place of me; a black cat plushie for me, in place of Miyagi.

I thought that if we couldn't sleep together, then we could at least sleep with each other's belongings, so I offered the penguin to her, but I never expected that she would just give me a tissue cover in return.

"Well, it's been with Miyagi longer than Roro-chan has."

And to be honest, it's been around longer than I have. I haven't been "Miyagi's" for very long, so technically, the crocodile tissue cover is my senior. Not to mention, even Roro-chan is my senior. Both the crocodile and the black cat belonged to Miyagi long before I did.

Sigh.

I let out a sigh and roll over on the bed, avoiding the sunlight streaming in through the window, in the absence of Pen-chan. Pressing my palm against the wall that separates Miyagi's room from mine, I sigh again.

The bed without Pen-chan feels vast.

A penguin plush is just a small thing compared to a human, yet a bed missing something or someone that’s always there feels

strangely empty. The saggy, hollow crocodile tissue cover can't fill that void.

Having only the outer cover won't do.

I want the whole thing. Even if it was borrowed, I should have claimed it all.

The same goes for people. I want all of Miyagi. — Her heart, her body.

Having just the outer shell here, like the crocodile, isn't enough. Even though it was me who wanted to exchange fragments of each other, hoping at least for a piece, trying to sleep beside the limp tissue cover doesn't let me slumber peacefully, and I've started to long for Pen-chan back.

Miyagi had specially gotten it for me; it’s so cuddly. It's not that the crocodile is to blame; it's just that my mind drifts to trivial thoughts, and now I feel the absence of Pen-chan sharply.

The problem is, I can't just casually ask for it back.

The last time I saw Pen-chan in Miyagi's room, it was carefully laid on the bed. Someone had thoughtfully tucked it in with a futon. I couldn't tell if Miyagi slept with it, but it had a pillow too, and it was being treated with such care that it made it hard to ask for its return.

Moreover, this crocodile, which was exchanged to replace Miyagi, knows what I've done on this bed.

What I did here, thinking about Miyagi.

It’s something I once spoke of with Miyagi, although it's not something one would usually share with the person involved; it's better left unsaid. Unless Miyagi were to ask, it’s not something I'd casually bring up.

Still, the crocodile knows.

If Pen-chan could talk, I'd want it to recount to me everything it saw and heard when it returns from Miyagi's room, but if the crocodile could speak, I'd need to keep its mouth sealed.

Tape it shut with duct tape so its gaping mouth could never open.

Of course, I know full well that the tissue cover crocodile won't suddenly start talking and report what I've done to Miyagi. Yet, considering what this crocodile "witnessed" at night makes it hard to simply return it. It's not like I can just ask for Pen-chan back, so I've been endlessly pondering what to do with the crocodile.

I sigh again, lifting my hand from the wall, then adjust the shapeless body of the crocodile.

Checking my phone, it's around time to prepare lunch. Opening the door and heading to the shared space, I find Miyagi simmering water in a pot. She gives me a glare.

"Sendai-san, you're late."
"It's not even noon yet, so I'm not late. Besides, if you thought I was late, you should have called me."
"Come out without needing me to call."
"Okay, okay."

I respond to Miyagi, who seems perennially displeased, and look at the table where pasta and a pouch of meat sauce sit, revealing the day's menu. The fridge also holds maitake mushrooms and enoki, perfect for soy butter sautéed Japanese-style pasta.

"Miyagi, should I make lunch?"
"No. I'll do it, Sendai-san, you just prepare the plates."

She says this in a sullen tone and turns her back to me. Though watching a simmering pot isn't exactly necessary, she clearly prefers focusing on it over facing me.

"Let me do it."
"No."

Hearing her curt reply, I suggest, "Just sit down until the water boils," prompting Miyagi to reluctantly settle into a chair.

"Sendai-san, you should sit too."

Nodding at her indifferent voice, I don't sit. Instead, I approach Miyagi and gently smooth her black hair, letting my thumb graze

over her plumeria earrings. Tugging on the strings of her hoodie, I lean in for a kiss on her cheek, only to be met with a gentle shove to my belly.

Here it is again, I think.

Since Mio left, Miyagi has resisted my attempts to initiate kisses. However, it’s not as though she doesn't want to kiss. On the contrary, she initiates kisses herself, tugging at my clothes demanding more.

Yet, she'll push my hand away anytime I try to caress her sides or waist. If I don’t try to kiss her first, Miyagi won't either.

Even today, she rejected my kiss, but then in a low voice calls, "Sendai-san," and kisses me.

I can't fathom her thoughts, but as long as she lets me kiss her, I won’t complain. She allows me to part her lips and slip in my tongue and lets me tangle with hers.

Now, Miyagi and I are intertwined.
She holds and pulls at my clothes.

Pulling back, I look at Miyagi.
Her gaze avoids mine, but her grip on my clothing remains.

Mio’s visit changed everything.

If Miyagi’s attitude changed because of that, then—

The word "jealousy" pops into my mind.

Though Miyagi hasn’t said anything, it seems to fit her behavior perfectly, and I can't help but mention the name of our loud friend.

"Mio said she wants to have pizza in Miyagi’s room next time."

If mentioning this name can change Miyagi, I want to use it.

"...When?"
"Not sure?"
"She's not coming over soon, right?"

Miyagi furrows her brow. Whether this is jealousy or merely annoyance, I can't tell.

"Probably not."
"'Probably' isn't good enough. Promise me you'll make sure."
"Alright. I'll get Mio to hold off from coming around for a while."

"Promise that with the earrings."

"Fine."

I reach out to Miyagi, touch her earrings with my fingertips, and promise, “Leave Mio to me,” then lean forward. Naturally, I'm pushed to a stop by a forehead push before touching her earring. Instead, Miyagi kisses mine.

"What about tomorrow?"

Miyagi mumbles, standing up.

"Are you looking forward to White Day?"

Though no marks are made on the calendar, tomorrow is indeed White Day. Without me having to say anything, her asking about our plans brings me happiness.

"You did mention that we'd do something for White Day. If there are no plans, I won't do anything."

"I definitely have plans. Remember, I said on Valentine's Day that we'd bake cookies together, then I'd cook whatever you want to eat? Since it's a special occasion, we could go out before that if you like. What do you think?"

"Are you planning to go out with that on your neck?"

I touch my neck. Up until today, there are still three marks left by Miyagi. All of them are in visible spots.

"I can wear a turtleneck, so it should be fine, right?"

Though one is in a questionable spot regarding whether it can be hidden well, it shouldn't stand out unless I wear a ponytail.

"Are we not going anywhere today?"

Without answering about tomorrow's plans, the conversation shifts to today's plans.

"Do you want to go somewhere, Miyagi?"

"...After we eat, I'll go to your room, Sendai-san."

Miyagi lays out the plans as if ignoring my question, but since it's what I want for the afternoon too, I have no complaints.

"Sounds good. How about we watch a movie?"

This time she replies with an "okay" to my question. Miyagi returns to the pot and opens the lid. When I hand her the pasta, she pours an amount that seems like too much for two people into the pot.

Things I Want Miyagi to Do (II)

Part 269

"It hurts."

I gently rubbed my stomach, feeling stuffed with pasta. Miyagi had cooked enough for more than three people. We had divided it equally between the two of us, yet I was so full there was no room left for dessert.

"You should've left some."

Miyagi, who had come over to my room, spoke in a somewhat displeased tone. When I glanced at her sitting beside me, she seemed oddly unbothered despite having eaten quite a lot.

"It would've been wasteful."
"But it's better than being too full to move. If you're uncomfortable, why not lie down?"
"It's not that I can't move."

I wasn't so stuffed that I wanted to lie flat on the floor, though I wouldn't jump at the chance to run a marathon right now. I was content leaning back against the bed, still capable of sitting comfortably.

"So, what movie are we watching? Or do you prefer a drama or anime?"

After the meal, we would watch a movie in my room. It was a promise I hadn't forgotten with Miyagi. Still, I was open to doing something else if she wanted a change of plans.

"Hmm."

Miyagi wrapped her fingers around the strings of her hoodie absentmindedly, mulling over her choice.

"Isn't there something you want to watch?"

When I pressed her, she unknotted the tangled strings and glanced at me vaguely, tugging at the hoodie strings before looking away.

“Miyagi?”
“Yeah.”

Her response was brief, and silence ensued. The strings of her hoodie drooped, her hands pressed against the floor, eyes fixed downward instead of on me.

I wasn’t sure why, but Miyagi seemed off.

Perhaps mentioning Mio’s name earlier was a mistake. Although it was true, maybe it wasn't the right moment to bring it up.

“If there’s nothing you’re interested in, maybe we can do something else?”

I offered her a smile as she continued staring at the floor. Naturally, she didn’t look back at me. Instead, she murmured softly.

“...Could you get the nail clipper?”
“Eh, nail clipper? Why?”

Though it seemed we ruled out watching a movie, I couldn’t fathom why nail clippers were suddenly mentioned.

“I want to cut some nails.”
“Now?”
“Right now.”

Miyagi declared it firmly. I didn’t understand why she suddenly brought it up, but since it wasn’t something worth refusing, I fetched the nail clippers.

“I got them, so give me your hand.”

Reaching for her wrist, Miyagi shot me a visibly irritated look.

“No, Sendai-san, you should give me your hand.”
“Why?”
“Because I’m going to cut your nails.”
“...Why?”

There wasn't any significant meaning to cutting nails. As people, our nails grow, and when they do, we cut them.

I appreciated having them a certain length, but if they were too long, cooking and everyday life became burdensome. Hence, I cut them. It's a simple notion, without depth.

Yet, when Miyagi suggested cutting my nails, I found myself with unnecessary thoughts.

"Remember at New Year's, Sendai-san, you trimmed my nails."

Miyagi spoke in a low voice.

"I did."

Back then, I had ulterior motives. I was aware of what such an act might lead to. I wondered if Miyagi shared any similar thoughts.

"...This is to return the favor."

Her quiet words eradicated everything between us, even the heavy feeling in my stomach from all the eaten pasta or the slight regret I felt when mentioning Mio's name.

The air in the room, set warmer at Miyagi's preference, buzzed audibly. Sounds usually unnoticed now seemed exaggeratedly loud.

I figured it must've been nerves. A temperature suitable for Miyagi that would normally feel hot now went undetected.

"I don't need any payback. I'll trim Miyagi's nails."

I gently laid my hand over hers, pressed against the floor.

This wasn't something I should expect.

Even though I understood, I hoped Miyagi shared the same thoughts as mine.

"No need to cut mine. Like I said, I'm cutting yours."

Miyagi's voice was low as she held my hand firmly.

“I bet you’d cut them too short.”
“I won’t do that.”

She defensively retorted while showing her own well-manicured nails. I inspected them; indeed, there were no deep trims, neatly cut.

“Okay, I get it, but you’d probably be terrible at clipping someone else’s nails, and it scares me.”

Having trimmed Miyagi's nails during New Year's made me realize cutting other people’s nails wasn’t as simple as handling your own.

“It’s okay. Just give me the clippers.”
“...You’re definitely going to hurt me.”
“I promise I won’t. Now hand them over.”
“Miyagi, you’re clumsy and genuinely scary.”
“Sendai-san, be quiet. Just give me the clippers.”

I clutched the nail clipper in my grip, unable to discern the reason behind her unhappy expression.

“Sendai-san.”

Her firm voice prompted me to hand her the nail clippers.

Miyagi wasn’t the type to convey a desire for intimacy through mundane gestures like nail clipping. Yet, her words suggested an inclination towards a shared longing.

She took the clippers, inspecting them as if seeing them for the first time, before carefully clipping my nails—starting with my thumb, pausing between each nail.

Logical thinking indicated I was the one entertaining these thoughts alone.

Watching as she neatly clipped down each nail to the sound of precision, I couldn’t help but wish she felt as I did.

A final click severed the last piece.

Even without comprehending Miyagi’s intentions, my nails had been reduced to neatly pressed lengths, with all the white edges trimmed.

“See, now they're too short.”

I complained to Miyagi, who placed the clippers on the table. It didn’t hurt, but I’d never had them this short, and it felt peculiar.

“This isn’t too short, and even if it were, nails grow back quickly.”
“Well, that’s true…”

As I looked away from my overly short nails, I met Miyagi’s gaze. Leaning in, I planted a kiss on her ear. She pushed my head away.

I grasped her wrist, lightly nipped her neck, pressing closer.

But Miyagi wouldn’t lie back.

"Sendai-san."
She called my name with dissatisfaction while resisting, pressing her hand against my stomach. The pasta’s presence returned, asserting itself within.

“Miyagi.”

I whispered beside her ear, caressing her waist. Her reaction, stronger than before, showed her disapproval, pushing me back firmly.

“Why does Sendai-san do things like this?”
“…Aren’t you inviting me?”
“I'm not. Step back.”

Having asked me to “step back,” Miyagi tugged at my clothing anxiously.

Could it be—

Could it be, something like that?

—Really?

"...Do you think I would say no, Miyagi?"

I asked directly, trying to avoid hearing she didn’t mean it that way, and so my question came out somewhat indirect.

"That doesn't clarify anything... I need a clear answer on whether I'm allowed to or not."

Miyagi's grip tightened on my clothes, pulling me closer until the distance shrank to half the space of a pen.

"Before I answer, I'd like to ask one thing. Was there a reason for cutting my nails?"
"Not really."
"Not really... You know, normally in situations like this, isn't it the one who does the touching who trims their nails?"
"...I just wanted to touch you first, and I don't know what's considered normal."

Miyagi's response was unexpected, making me want to confirm what I'd heard. But before I could, she interjected, "So, what's your answer? If you don't want to, we can just watch a movie."

"This isn't the kind of moment to switch to a movie."
"That doesn't help."
"I'm yours, Miyagi. Do as you like."
"What do you mean by that?"
"Do I really need to explain?"
"Yes, you do... You always ask me before we continue."

Miyagi was being diligent, following the proper steps, and trying to move forward. It felt like proof I was being treated better than a mere pet. It seemed to confirm that she truly cared for me.

It would be easier for her to simply proceed without considering my feelings, yet she was choosing to seek them out, which could only mean one thing.

I looked at Miyagi. Her grip loosened, and she averted her gaze.

In a quiet voice, she muttered something about not needing to watch a movie, and I could predict what she'd say next. She would likely suggest returning to her room, and I wanted to prevent that.

So I chose not to ask the obvious question.

Right now, if I pressed Miyagi to articulate her feelings into exact words, she'd probably escape from me and avoid processing those emotions.

"Miyagi."

I held her arm, ensuring she wouldn’t leave.

"I want you to do it."

These were the only words I could manage to say, but I made sure they were clear and unmistakable. Then, I kissed her fingertips, conveying what words alone couldn’t fully express.

Things I Want Miyagi to Do (III)

Part 270

Every second feels as though it's stretching on interminably. I've confessed my desires, yet Miyagi says nothing.

Silence during moments like this isn't good. The usual rhythm of conversation is disrupted, and the longer Miyagi remains quiet, the more I doubt the accuracy of what I said.

I grasp the hand that my lips just lightly brushed against, unsure of whether I should speak. As I hesitantly apply more pressure to her hand, she finally murmurs.

"...Move the alligator."

"You mean that one?"

I glance over at the alligator tissue cover lying neatly on the bed. "It's not like there's another alligator around," she replies, pulling her hand away. I stand and place the alligator beside the platypus on the floor.

"Is this okay?"

"It is. Also, close the curtain."

"Got it."

I pat the alligator, which fails in its role as a tissue cover, and the platypus, which fulfills its purpose, lightly on their heads, then follow her request to close the curtain. The room remains bright with the lights on.

"What should I do next?"

I ask again, but again Miyagi remains silent, staring intently at the alligator with furrowed brows.

That's not the face you make at a time like this.

I understand she's pondering over how to answer my question, yet her expression, which appears almost irritable, doesn't suit what we're about to do. Miyagi was the one who said, "I'll do it," so there's no harm in her wearing a softer expression.

"What should I do?"

Once more, I pose the question while sitting on the bed. Miyagi turns her unfitting expression toward me and softly speaks.

"Take off your clothes."

"I don't mind, but just me?"

"Only Sendai-san."

"You should take yours off too, Miyagi."

"I don't want to."

It's always been me undressing. She always aims to undress just me.

"At times like this, aren't both people supposed to undress?"

While standing, I gently nudge her foot.

"We can do it without getting undressed."

"Then doesn't that mean I don't have to undress either?"

"Sendai-san, you take yours off."

She definitively declares. Miyagi retains her right to refuse while I have none.

There was a time when she told me to say it if I disliked something, but I know throwing a tantrum here won't produce any positive outcomes. If I keep contradicting her, she'll surely say, "That's enough," or decide to return to her room, disappearing from my sight.

So, there is only one course of action— I stand up and, just as Miyagi desires, remove my sweater and skirt.

"This too."

She tugs at my camisole, and I follow by removing that as well. Yet, Miyagi remains unsatisfied.

"There's still more to take off."

Hearing the anticipated words, I look at the clothes lying on the floor. Unfolded, they seem excessively messy. It's impossible not to dwell on what's about to happen.

"Wasn't it just the clothes?"

"I don't remember."

Her blatant lie needs no further argument.

"What about Miyagi taking them off for me?"

"That's not an option, so do it yourself."

"You helped me last time, didn't you?"

Calling it a penalty game, she marked my body in countless spots, ordering me to strip just like today. Then, when I was down to my underwear, she undid my bra.

Today's situation parallels that one. Naturally, she should assist in undressing me. But Miyagi refuses my suggestion.

"Do it yourself."

Her voice is steely, and I release a small breath.

"Isn't it about time to turn off the lights?"

"Why say that now? This isn't your first time undressing in the light, is it?"

"Well, today feels a bit…"

—Embarrassing.

No, it’s not that previous times weren’t embarrassing; it’s just different today.

The first time I did something like this with Miyagi, it felt like skipping three or four steps at once. Even in subsequent instances, we skipped many steps, rushing forward. Yet today, I’m progressing one step at a time, deliberately.

“Sendai-san.”

She calls in a muted voice. Unless I voice a refusal, ahead lies the reality both Miyagi and I hope for—a certain future, devoid of ambiguity.

I wish to swiftly proceed. Nonetheless, my heart drums loudly.

Following the correct steps for a change means my reason, usually melted by passion, remains intact. Miyagi’s insistence on correctness encases my logic, trying to keep it anchored within me.

Miyagi's hand touches the strap of my bra. Her fingers press upon it, but the hand doesn't move beyond that. She neither adjusts nor removes it, merely urging me silently with her gaze.

Reason, at this moment, is a hindrance.

Tasks once simple become daunting. Facing Miyagi, knowing I alone will be exposed, feels daunting.

“You're unusually proactive today… Why?”

I ask a question with no expectation of a response. I need time to adapt to the new circumstances.

“Does it matter why?”

“I'm curious.”

“No need to be.”

“Is there no reason?”

“…Even I sometimes want to do things like this.”

“Eh?”

What did she just say?

Words that seemed implausible from Miyagi’s lips reached me.

“Miyagi, about what you just—”

“Sendai-san, shut up. Hurry up and undress.”

I wish to confirm the stunning statement, but her voice—which isn’t quite pleased or displeased—cuts me off. Inevitably, I can only reply with a faint “Alright”. With my breath shallow, avoiding her eyes, I unfasten my bra.

“Is this okay?”

Though she doesn’t reply, I sense her gaze fixed on my bare chest. She seldom hesitates in such moments.

“...Could you not stare so much?”

Dropping my bra onto the pile of garments at my feet, I avoid her gaze, pressing myself against her.

“I want to look.”

Her hand presses my shoulder, slightly pushing us apart, and I tighten my arms around her.

“Why do you want to look?”

“Because you’re beautiful, Sendai-san.”

“I've eaten too much; my stomach’s sticking out. I’m not beautiful.”

“Sendai-san, you’re always beautiful.”

It's only at times like this that Miyagi will casually comment on my beauty, so I really don't understand her. Normally, she doesn’t offer such compliments and would just brush it off like it’s no big deal. However, being praised by Miyagi isn’t an unpleasant experience, and it causes my cheeks to flush.

“…Thank you.”

As I quietly respond, Miyagi’s hand caresses my waist, sliding smoothly until it touches the last piece of fabric I’m wearing, causing me to break away.

Both top and bottom, everything— taking if off and showing it all to Miyagi might cause my heart to shatter.

"Miyagi, this string is getting in the way. Can't you just take it off?"

I tug at the drawstring of her hoodie, trying to deflect my embarrassment, and Miyagi's expression unmistakably darkens.

"No."

"You’ve undressed me this much, so can't you make at least a small concession?"

I tug the string once more, and she reluctantly shrugs off her hoodie. As a spur-of-the-moment gesture, I grab the hem of her T-shirt, suggesting, "Why not take this off too?" Her response comes low and firm.

"I said just the hoodie. Now, Sendai-san, lie down quietly on the bed."

Miyagi lightly nudges my ankle. With resignation, I lift the covers and sit on the bed, and without a word, the lights go out.

"...It's still pretty bright," Miyagi notes with apparent dissatisfaction.

"True, it’s bright outside," I reply.

Despite the curtains claiming to block out external light, the room remains dim rather than pitch-black. Light seeps through the gaps, casting a faint glow.

Thus, I'm still shy, even if her gaze no longer meets mine.

There have been times when Miyagi blindfolded me to avoid being seen, despite her not being the one being touched. Tonight, she remains silent, refraining from asking for a towel to cover my eyes.

With the towel blocking my vision, even if Miyagi was watching me, my embarrassment would be lost in the darkness. But she silently approaches and gently pushes me down onto the bed.

"Can I kiss you?" she asks quietly, brushing her fingers over my lips. Rather than saying yes, I press my lips to hers, and she firmly pins my shoulders down into the mattress.

"I said I'm taking the lead here."

Her determination evident, I reach for her cheek. Closing my eyes, I feel something soft graze my lips.

Once, twice.

She kisses me fleetingly, nibbling my ear with tenderness unlike her usual assertive force.

I could feel Miyagi's body heat through my earlobe, and it felt good. Something warm presses against my ear, making it wet. Her breath, audible in the silence, sends a tingle down my neck.

"Miyagi, it tickles."

"You don't like it?"

"It's not that I dislike it."

"Then it's fine, isn't it?"

She moves from my ear to my neck, biting softly. Her teeth sink in, neither too gently nor harshly. The feeling of her soft lips and hard teeth makes it hard to tell whether I'm feeling pleasure or pain.

If she's going to be kind to me she should just keep being kind, but it would be troubling if she suddenly reverted to her usual self. I don't understand the point of her being so gentle with me.

I grip her T-shirt as firmly as her teeth bite down on my neck.

I wish she'd just remove it.

The clothes that Miyagi wears feel like walls between us. She accepts me, yet hasn't given me everything. Though I don't demand

that she becomes mine once I've given myself to her, I wish she'd permit more.

"Miyagi."

Upon my soft call, her teeth withdraw, and a kiss lands on the indented mark, followed by a fleeting trace of her tongue.

"Can you take this off?"

I tug at her T-shirt enough to stretch it.

"No."

Her retort is succinct as she presses her lips to my neck once more. She repeatedly kisses the same spot beneath my collarbone. Brushing her shoulder through the T-shirt, I ponder how much time must pass before she's willing to shed her clothes.

Wondering if I might touch the spots she's marked, I move my hand only to have my wrist captured and placed on the bed—pinned as if in admonishment.

My hands find themselves at a loss, clutching and releasing the sheets as Miyagi meticulously adorns me with tender marks.

Where my neck and shoulders meet, slightly above my chest—each spot she claims cascades me in Miyagi's warmth. The minor sting and the heat of her lips shatter the layers of restraint that once held my reason.

I reach out to comb through Miyagi's soft hair, the sleekness pleasant under my fingertips.

Upon lightly pulling at the strands wrapped around my fingers, Miyagi looks up.

"Can I touch you?"

The question is quiet but deliberate.

"Where?"

"Here."

With her eyes still on me, Miyagi slides her fingertips and presses them tightly against the tip of my breast.

—But she's already touching me.

Simple words escape me. Her touch—a touch to a place unfamiliar even to myself—awakens parts of me, causing me to seize her hand clumsily.

Beneath the dim light, my world turns a dull monochrome, yet I see her face as she must see mine — a shared visibility that ties an invisible thread of vulnerability between us.

My body tenses up in strange places. What is correct becomes a muddled path, as I find myself strangely conscious of Miyagi.

"Sendai-san, I want to touch you," Miyagi quietly insists.

I know that she is treating me well in her own way. Her effort to care, her delicate inquiries, seem earnest. Still, some things are best left unsaid.

"No need to ask everything. Just do what you want, Miyagi."

"Why shouldn’t I ask?"

"Because it’s embarrassing to answer."

"But you always seemed indifferent to it."

"I’m not. I’ve always been embarrassed. So stop asking, just do as you like—I won't stop you."

"Can I touch you anywhere?"

"Yes."

In my soft admission, our eyes meet. In the dark room, Miyagi’s eyes appear even deeper.

Her hair, I decide, is a nuisance at a time like this. While I don't really want to be looked at, I wish to see her clearly.

I push her hair back behind her ear. As I caress her cheek and call her name, Miyagi's hand sticks beneath my collarbone, brushing over my skin until it covers my chest.

My consciousness is focused on one point.

I feel something hard against Miyagi's palm, and I almost stop breathing. On my neck, a warmth presses down, lips drawing downwards. Her hand moves purposefully, assuredly, as I grasp her clothes again.

Did it always feel this good?

Her actions mirror those from before, yet today feels profoundly different.

Those past encounters fade like whispers, and though I replay them endlessly, I can't remember clearly.

I thought I remembered all the times Miyagi touched me, and I touched Miyagi, but I can't find them—a consequence of mixing my fabricated memories with my real ones.

The Miyagi I fabricated interlaces with the reality before me.

"Sendai-san."

I gasp as I hear her voice next to my ear. Miyagi's fingertips stroke the center of my chest. She presses hard on that spot, which is clearly changing, and my body flinches involuntarily. My breath trembles as it passes my lips.

"Wait."

Miyagi disregards my plea.

Her lips touch the tip of my breast.
She gently licks, like a grooming cat, then bites down.

"Ah—"

I let out a sound and bite my lips. In the past, despite embarrassment, I'd manage, but not this time.

If it means being touched by Miyagi, then letting her hear my voice should be acceptable, yet right now, I don't want to. I want to solidify the reason I once wished to melt away and tether it deep within me. If it vanishes entirely, I can't predict what will become of me.

Her tongue presses against me, and her teeth latch on. Sucked strongly, I inadvertently grasp Miyagi's shoulder.

"W-wait a minute."

Though it's not something forbidden and certainly something I wanted, my emotions can't keep up.

My breathing grows shallow—inhale, exhale, inhale—consciously trying to steady it.

The reason, now stripped of its coatings, begins to liquefy and is utterly useless.

"Miyagi."

A scratchy voice emerges, and I bite my lips once more. I don't want to make any sound, yet I want to stop her.

"Stop."

She should have heard me, but her lips remain fused to my chest, unwilling to let go. Upon clutching her shoulder tightly, Miyagi finally lifts her face.

"... Sendai-san, you said it’s fine to touch anywhere."

"I didn't say that licking is okay."

A low "liar" escapes her lips as her fingers lazily trace over the spot her lips had recently been.

"Miyagi, I said stop."

This seems wrong; all my focus converges on the spot Miyagi touches. Each sensation amplifies, multiplying the pleasure.

"Why only there?"

No answer from Miyagi. Her fingers keep moving, prompting faint sounds to escape my lips.

This response is natural to something pleasurable, but my body overreacts. Though longing to engage with Miyagi in such closeness, mere touches on my chest shouldn't be this overwhelming.

But even so, the body that has begun reacting won't heed my will.

Heat pulsates deep within. Other places ache for attention. I grab the hand on my chest, forcing it to stop.

"Tha-that's enough."

"Why?"

"Move on."

I whisper near her ear.

"Move on to what?"

"Are you asking that on purpose?"

I reposition the clasped hand just below my ribcage, pushing it further downward.

Even if what I desire isn't a must, it's something I'd relish repeatedly. I wish for countless, unending moments like these with Miyagi.

Because this act is outside the bounds of mere roommates.

Miyagi, who wants to remain as a roommate, steps beyond to engage in this act, bearing significant importance for me.

"... Make me feel even better."

My voice is soft but audible enough for Miyagi. Without replying, her hand slips slowly inside my underwear. Though I know what's going on down there, and would rather avoid her seeing my face, I refuse to avert my eyes. If I close them or look away, I won't be able to see Miyagi touching me.

Her fingers slide between my legs, going right where I crave them as they start their gentle dance.

"Does it feel good?"

Her voice, almost a whisper, reaches my ears.

"Y-yes."

"... Better than when you do it yourself?"

My reason, already melted inside me, flows outward, guided by Miyagi's fingers. What overflows from me stains Miyagi, making the movement of her fingertips smoother.

"It's better with you, Miyagi."

My words elicit a press of her fingers with intensifying firmness.

A voice escapes before I can even bite my lip.

As Miyagi's warmth encircles places exclusive to her, I can finally perceive her affection—one she rarely displays openly—despite knowing her heart aligns with mine.

This isn't an act she would do for anyone else, only for me, hence the conviction.

"Miyagi."

I call, clutching her clothes. Her breathing quickens slightly. Lips press against my neck, and her teeth nip at my ear. My viscous desire overflows, drenching her fingers.

This is us showing sides of ourselves that we don't show to anyone else, only to one another.

"... Shiori."

Our eyes meet as I speak her name, realizing her cheeks are flushed, even if obscured by shadows. "You're cute," I tell her.

"No need to say that."

"But you’re cute."

"Shut up."

Miyagi says, and her fingers glide down, then sharply caress back up. My hips nearly jump and I grasp the sheets. As if to loosen my stiff body, her warmth travels downward, halting awkwardly before restarting its course. Her fingers roam, uncertain, as if searching for something or lost.

"It’s okay."

I pull Miyagi’s arm, reassuring her.

"... What is?"

Her wandering fingers stop.

"You can do what you want, Miyagi."

It was the act of entering my body—something I'd never impede. But her fingers remain motionless.

"I'm yours, Miyagi. Prove that every part of me belongs to you."

"Everything?"

"Yes, all of it. Show me that I’m yours completely."

A soft breath slips from Miyagi's lips. "Is it really okay?" she asks, as I pull her arm once more.

Tentatively, her fingers journey forward, as if she were handling something that would break if she touched it. Miyagi's body heat penetrates into me. The intrusion of something not myself tugs at my being, disrupting my breathing.

Inhale, exhale—such a simple thing feels difficult.

I meet her gaze. Her expression is difficult to decipher, teetering between concentration and excitement. It's ambiguous. Yet there's no doubt she's watching me, and that fact alone brings joy.

The body heat that is not mine continues to move impatiently yet slowly deeper into my body, and my body accepts Miyagi, who should be nothing more than a foreign object, with astonishing ease. Her entrance intermingles us—a recognition of disparity paired with unparalleled proximity. Our boundaries blend but remain distinct: separate, yet entwined.

"Miyagi."

I confirm by calling her name.

Like a stray cat, she entered the vacant sections of my high school life, adapted seamlessly, and in doing so, defined me as myself. Without Miyagi, my existence would likely weave through a monochrome tapestry of superficial smiles.

That's why I never want to let go of Miyagi.

"Are you okay?"

Her voice floats with concern, pulling my gaze back to hers. She averts her eyes, but soon she looks back at me.

More clearly than words, I encircle her back, pulling her into an embrace.

I don't know which fingers are intertwined within me.
But it feels good.
That's what I want to tell her.

"Am I doing alright?"

Her tentative question meets reassurance when I call softly, "Miyagi."

Good or bad? None of that matters. I'll be fine as long as Miyagi does it.

"…More."

Do it.
Forever.
Until I'm broken.

That's what I think, but Miyagi, who usually knows no moderation, moves her fingers gently.

The part of me intertwined deeply with Miyagi is more honest than I am, clinging tightly to her, expressing the desire to become even more entwined.

I want to give even more of myself to Miyagi.
I want her to know even more about me.

This insatiable greed for Miyagi is overwhelming—wanting her more and more.
Meanwhile, her warmth approaches and retreats gradually. The emotions I can’t contain overflow, staining Miyagi.

Outside my body, Miyagi's fingertips touch the part of me where nerves gather and become overly sensitive.

I can't seem to breathe correctly.
My breath is heavy.
Inside and out, my body is touched by Miyagi.

As I try to express how good it feels by tracing my nails on her back, I'm thwarted by the fact that my nails were trimmed too short.
Failing that, like Miyagi did in the past, I bite her neck.

Hard, harder—enough to leave a mark forever.

"Ow, it hurts," Miyagi murmurs painfully, her hand coming to a stop.

Only someone as foolish as Miyagi would focus on leaving marks like this.

She should recall what she did when I touched her—biting and scratching.

"Fi-finish it already."

Whispering into her ear, I gently nibble her earlobe, along with the plumeria earring. When I touch the earring with the tip of my tongue, her fingers press harder.

"Sendai-san."

Her comforting voice reverberates through me as Miyagi connects deeply with me. I suppress the involuntary movements of my body and plead.

"Call my name more."

She softly repeats, "Sendai-san".

Hazuki.

That's what I want her to call me, but I can't spare the energy to say it aloud.

Her repeated call of Sendai-san pulls a burning mass from deep within me, the pleasure twisting into longing, urging for release. I clutch Miyagi tightly.

Our warmth at the center of my body intertwines intensely.

"Shi-ori."

A name often called in this bed escapes unconsciously, vanishing into the shadows, and like the alligator slumped on the floor, my body goes limp.

In a daze.
For several minutes.
I catch my breath.

From the dim ceiling to Miyagi beside me, I shift my gaze, tugging at her clothing.

"Sendai-san, it'll stretch."

"If you don’t want it stretched, then hug me."

Though it's something I wanted, I let Miyagi have her way. Thus, this small selfishness should be allowed.

"... My hands are dirty."

"It's okay."

"It's not okay. You'll get dirty."

"But I'm the one who made the mess, and it'll just come back to me."

After all, my body is already dirtied—sticky and messy and unpleasant. However, since it comes from Miyagi, I have no desire to wipe it away.

"But—"

I grasp her wrist and kiss her dirty fingertips.

"Sendai-san!"

"It's fine since it's not Miyagi's, it's mine."

"It's not fine."

Miyagi attempts to push me away, her hand landing on my chest. Something slick attaches there, causing Miyagi to utter a surprised "Ah."

"Don't worry about it."

I pull her dirty hand closer, and she rests her forehead against my shoulder.

"... Hazuki, you're mine, right?"

Hearing my rarely called name, my breath nearly stops.

"Yes."

I respond as I always do to the often-asked question, but despite being so deeply connected, I can't prove I'm hers completely, which is why she asks so repeatedly.

A straightforward declaration that "Sendai Hazuki belongs to Miyagi Shiori" to everyone around us—Utsunomiya, Mio, and others—could quickly establish that bond. If they acknowledged it, their treatment of me would reinforce the fact that Hazuki Sendai belongs to Shiori Miyagi.

Recognition cements relationships.

However, as mere roommates, such measures are beyond our reach.

"Don’t let anyone else see this side of you, Sendai-san."

She reverts to her usual way of calling me.

"Okay."

"Also, you can be with anyone, anywhere, but don’t forget that you’re mine."

"Okay."

I grip her clothing.

The protective covering she is wrapped in.
The barrier between us.

Repeated actions like these might not be enough to remove it.

If I could simply utter "I love you," it might fill the remaining gaps between us, but there's a chance that covering could turn into paper or even steel.

"Miyagi, you're cute."

Instead of declaring love, I choose words that truthfully describes the scene before me.

"Shut up."

Her sticky hands press against me.
And so, I tighten my grip, ensuring Miyagi doesn’t wander too far away.

Chapter 92 Extra 1

Penguin's Soliloquy

(Penguin PoV)
Part 268-extra.1

Dear Kamo-chan-san,
It's me, yes, me—Pen-chan.
Right now, I'm in Shiori-san's bed.
Every night, I sleep beside her. Consequently, returning to where you are isn't something I can do.

I thought about writing a letter to Kamo-chan-san, the platypus living in Hazuki-san's room. However, my flippers aren't exactly made for holding pens, nor do I have any paper. So, no letters can be written. More than that, I need to figure out how to deal with this situation.

—What exactly is an exchange, anyway?

I don't understand why I've been swapped with Wani-san or how long I'll have to stay here. My owner, Hazuki-san, has visited this room numerous times, yet she never takes me back with her.

I long to sleep beside Hazuki-san, who I adore, just like before.

Yet, the habit of sleeping alongside Hazuki-san has transformed into the habit of sleeping beside Shiori-san. The routine of being petted and kissed by Hazuki-san has turned into one where I'm smacked on the head, my beak pinched, and my belly squeezed by Shiori-san.

Even though, sometimes, she does embrace me and talk to me, which I somewhat appreciate, Shiori-san is far too rough in how she handles me. Ideally, I'd like her to talk to me more and shower me with kisses, akin to what Hazuki-san does.

Given that I don't know when I can return to Hazuki-san, I don't think it's too much to ask for that kind of treatment.

Sure, there are complaints I have, but there are also good things I didn't have when I was with Hazuki-san.

For one, she ensures I'm properly tucked into bed under a blanket.

Shiori-san puts me to sleep in the bed and pulls the covers over me. Since Hazuki-san changes my resting place based on her mood, I think Shiori-san's approach should be acknowledged.

This room has other merits, too. At night, Black Cat Roro-chan-san keeps me company in conversation. Since Roro-chan-san is a good and cute creature, it would be nice if it came to play in Hazuki-san's room, too.

Kamo-chan-san, living in Hazuki-san's room, is often silent and cranky. It might slightly resemble this room's owner, Shiori-san, but Shiori-san is far more favored by Hazuki-san than Kamo-chan-san ever is.

I want to have affection for what Hazuki-san likes, so I've grown to rather like Shiori-san quite a bit. I won't oppose Hazuki-san and Shiori-san getting along, even if it's just a little.

Therefore, I hope I can return to Hazuki-san's room soon.

There are so many things I need to report to Hazuki-san.

Such as how kind Shiori-san is to Roro-chan-san.
However, she tends to be a bit cold to Hazuki-san.

Also, how Shiori-san kisses Roro-chan-san, but still kisses Hazuki-san more frequently.

These are matters I wish to report to Hazuki-san.

I want to speak extensively about Shiori-san with Hazuki-san, be petted a lot, and be kissed a lot.

So I wish to return to Hazuki-san's room soon, but I don't know how to make that happen.

The only thing I comprehend right now is that Hazuki-san and Shiori-san are about to have pasta.

Earlier, Shiori-san was looking up a Carbonara recipe, so I'm certain of it. However, she hasn't been gone from the room long, so it's uncertain if it turned out well.

Most likely, it didn’t.

From what Roro-chan-san has said, Shiori-san is rumored to not be very adept at cooking.

Hazuki-san is kind and probably eats anything while declaring it delicious, but I'm concerned about my owner's stomach.

Still, why would Shiori-san decide to make something like Carbonara when she's not good at cooking?

I don't understand. It doesn't make sense. Human beings are so complicated.

Chapter 92 Extra 2

Crocodile's Soliloquy

(Crocodile PoV)
Part 268-extra.2

I think I'm done for. It wouldn't be surprising if I died today.

That's how terribly hungry I am.

The reason for my hunger is obvious, and there's no need to elaborate, but if I must, it's because "the tissue box in my stomach is gone."

Without it, I become a feeble and useless crocodile. This means I won't be able to fulfill my duty as the number one member of Shiori-chan's fan club and her crocodile tissue cover, watching over Shiori-chan until the end of my days.

My insides are boiling with anger, or rather, I lack the strength without tissues, and I really can't accept this.

All of it, every bit, entirely, is Sendai-san's fault. Apparently, she asked Shiori-chan, "Can I borrow something in place of Pen-chan?" and I ended up being swapped for a peaceful-looking penguin plushie.

Sendai-san didn't specify which plushie to trade with her, so it could have been the black cat. But for some reason, it was me who was chosen.

I can't accept this at all.

Lying on Sendai-san's bed, I let out a huge sigh through my wide mouth.

I love Shiori-chan dearly, but what happened this time is just cruel.

The black cat is still a child and not as reliable as I am, so I can

understand why I was chosen. But I didn't want to be in Sendai-san's room.

Sendai-san is the villain who tries to lead my Shiori-chan astray.

And not just Shiori-chan, she's trying to seduce me too. Evidence of this is how she kissed me multiple times in this room, saying things like, "You're not Roro-chan, are you," while taking me.

It's infuriating, infuriating, infuriating. I've been kissed before, but I refuse to forgive it.

My lovely mouth is meant for Shiori-chan alone.
The only person allowed to kiss my fluffy mouth is Shiori-chan.

Why does Sendai-san kiss me over and over again? And on top of that, she calls me "Shiori" sometimes.

I'm not Shiori-chan; I'm a crocodile.

Even my name—

Oh, right, I don't have a name yet.
Shiori-chan hasn't named me.

Despite being with Shiori-chan longer than Sendai-san, I don't have a name for her to call me by.
This is all because of Sendai-san, who is studying now.

I watch Sendai-san’s back intently from the bed.

Being in this room, I’ve discovered that she studies longer than Shiori-chan does. Even though she’s a bad person for trying to sway my Shiori-chan, she’s serious.

She gently strokes me while I'm on the bed.
Even though she’s a bad person for trying to seduce my Shiori-chan, she's kind.

“Right.”

Suddenly, Sendai-san turns around and pets my head. Then she mumbles, “You didn’t have a name, did you?” and adds, “How about Waa-chan?”

—I absolutely refuse.

I thought Sendai-san was a serious and kind person, but I was wrong.

Without even asking Shiori-chan, she attempts to name me, and what a senseless name it is.

Anyone who tries to name me Waa-chan is someone who deceives and leads others astray.

No matter how many times she kisses me, I won't allow her to get close to Shiori-chan. No matter how many times she visits Shiori-chan's room, no matter how many times she kisses Shiori-chan, even if Shiori-chan were to kiss her back multiple times, I would never accept it.

I cannot entrust Shiori-chan to someone as thoughtless as Sendai-san, who can't even bring a tissue box for my hungry stomach.

As long as my eyes are open, I must keep watching over Sendai-san to ensure she doesn't do anything strange to Shiori-chan.

So please hurry, Shiori-chan, come and fetch me at once.

Chapter 92 Extra 3

Crocodile's Soliloquy

(Crocodile PoV)
Part 268-extra.3

Foxes, whales, hedgehogs. One by one, they disappeared.

The numerous companions who once crowded the sales floor dwindled in number, and before I knew it, I found myself placed on a cart marked with "Sale."

Something's off. This doesn't make any sense.

It's impossible to believe that I, the most excellent crocodile of all, am being treated this way. Although there are others alongside me on the cart, when compared to the number of companions who have found their masters, we are but a few.

Why did it come to this?

I was supposed to be the first to have a kind and wonderful master, dedicatedly protecting and supplying tissues. But to think that no master would ever appear was something I never expected.

I'm saddened.

Again today, the heartless voice of a clerk making comments like "unsold stock" reaches my ears.

It's over. I'm done for.

Surely I will be discarded without ever fulfilling my role as a tissue cover.

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Just when I was drowning in such pessimism, I was saved by Shiori-chan, a middle school student. She rescued me from the cart,

marked with a forty percent off tag, carried me to the register, and took me home.

Once there, she placed me in the sunniest spot in the room to bask, fluffing up my gloomy spirits. Naturally, she filled my belly with tissues, finally giving me a purpose.

Half a year has gone by since then, during which Shiori-chan became my idol, and I became the first member of Shiori-chan's fan club.

Though she's still a child in middle school, Shiori-chan is truly a kind and wonderful person.

I feel fortunate to be working as a tissue cover for Shiori-chan.

With her, there's no fear of being discarded, and I don't have to feel sad watching my companions find their masters. Sometimes, Shiori-chan even pets me.

I have been happy here ever since I arrived.

However, there is something that concerns me. I often notice Shiori-chan looking lonely.

Whether it's a school day or not, Shiori-chan is always by herself. It's rare for anyone other than Shiori-chan to enter this room.

That's why I want to practice talking.

So that one day, I might become someone Shiori-chan can talk to.

Chapter 93

I Want to Keep Watching Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 271

She's late.

Sendai-san hasn't returned from the bathroom. I walked in a circle around the table in the shared space and then let out a deep sigh.

Facing her feels difficult. Even talking to her seems hard.

Today, I was the one who suggested doing it, and I did what I wanted. Yet, Sendai-san appeared different from how she's always been, which makes me feel as though I've also become someone other than who I was before.

If possible, I'd like to escape this house and go somewhere—anywhere. But if I run away, I wouldn't know if Sendai-san ended up somewhere else entirely.

If something that belongs to me changes into something unknown in my absence, it would be troubling.

That's why, despite the embarrassment, I have to stay here and keep my eyes on Sendai-san.

Yet, she hasn't come back.

When I asked about dinner, she unexpectedly said, "Cup noodles are fine," and has since vanished into the bathroom.

I should have set a timer like with cup noodles—something like forty-five or sixty minutes. That way, all I'd have to do is watch the clock, without fussing over when she'd return from the bathroom.

I poke at the container of one of the two prepared cup noodles, the one on the right. The tall container rolls along the table, towards the

edge, stopping just short of falling to the floor.

"She's definitely late."

I place the rolling cup noodle atop the other.

It feels like it's been over an hour now. Maybe she's collapsed in the bathroom.

If I keep waiting here, it might be too late. So, I should go check on her. If nothing's wrong, that's fine. If something is, then going to the bathroom will have served its purpose.

I leave the shared space and walk down the short hallway, stopping to anxiously gaze at the bathroom door.

I've never opened this door while Sendai-san was bathing, nor have I ever thought to.

"I'm just concerned."

I murmur softly, exhaling. This is not a mistake; it's the right thing to do for a roommate.

If she's unwell, that would be a problem.

She's more prone to catching colds than I am, having been bedridden twice that I know of. It's not that she's weak, but she's not especially sturdy, either. It's simply concern about her being in the bathroom so long.

This isn't deep or profound.

"I'm opening it."

Facing the bathroom, I say the words I don't quite mean, and open the door. Naturally, Sendai-san isn't there; only the basket holding her change of clothes remains. I look at the door separating the sink area from the bath.

One step, then two.
I move closer to the door.

There's light inside but no clear glimpse of her.

I hear no water. No singing.

—Though I don't even know if she sings in the bath.

I give the door a light tap, calling, "Sendai-san." There's a splash and her voice floats through.

"...What?"
"Are you alive?"
"I'm alive. What's going on?"

Sendai-san answers in her usual clear voice. It only faintly echoes, and her tone hasn't shifted.

"I just came to confirm you're still alive."
"What's that supposed to mean?"
"You were taking too long, so I was worried you might've collapsed."
"I'm fine, so don't worry. I'll be out soon."
"Well, that's good."

It's not really good.
Knowing she hasn't collapsed or is unwell hasn't made my legs change their rooted stance. Despite having no more reason to stay, I can't take my eyes off the door.

"...Miyagi, are you still there?"

A voice neither loud nor soft reaches me, followed by another gentle splash.

"Yeah."

I voice my reply towards the door and tap lightly again.

"Even if you don't stand watch there, I won't get dizzy."

Though she let me touch her and made rarely heard sounds earlier, her voice now seems to have forgotten all that. I thought I knew everything about Sendai-san, but with her beyond this door, she feels like a stranger.

I tap the door once more, pressing my palm flat against it.

"Sendai-san."

I can't see her even though she's so close. My Sendai-san remains out of sight.

"Yes?"
"Can I open it?"

I find the door obstructive, covering what I wish to see—my Sendai-san.

I want to open it now and affirm her presence.

But she isn't a stuffed toy. She's not like the penguin resting in my room—something I can turn, rotate, or do as I please with. If I opened the door without asking, she might not want to talk to me or could begin to dislike me.

So, I wait for her response.

"...No."

Her faint, unclear voice reaches me.

"Why?"
"Why, you ask? That's my line. Why would you open it? There's no need."

"Because I want to see."

I respond carefully, barely loud enough for her to hear, but get no reply. Only the sound of water gently breaking the silence reaches me.

Sendai-san doesn't speak.

Though it's unlike her to show modesty. She's usually unashamed.

Yet today, she won't respond to my words.

"Sendai-san."

When I call, urging an answer, another splash sounds and then her voice arrives.

"If you say you'll join me in the bath, I might let you open it."

Her trivial suggestion miffs me—I give the door a light kick.

"...I'll be in my room, so come out before you faint."
"Miyagi, you're such a killjoy."

The loud splash sounds and the bathroom lapses into silence. I detach my hand from the door and unroot my reluctant feet, retreating to my room.

Switching on the light, I pull a black cat plush from my shelf and place it by my pillow. Shoving the penguin that I'd tucked in towards the bed's edge, I lie down. With a heavy exhale, I press the unrelinquished plush against the wall.

"Are you going back to Sendai-san?"

The penguin that came to my room from hers now seems like it belongs beside me, preventing me from returning it. Sendai-san hasn't been asking for it back.

Thus, perhaps it's fine for it to stay with me, but who knows—maybe the plush wishes to return.

"Say something, won't you?"

The penguin doesn't talk. Of course not.
Yet it's bothersome.

"You're a lot more taciturn than Sendai-san."

I place the penguin on my chest and give its head a light pat.

Tomorrow is White Day, but today is just an ordinary day.

While it might be one of those dates that's easily memorable, it's not a day that could be called an anniversary. Since it's just an insignificant day, I figured it should be fine.

Just a regular spring break day.

There's nothing wrong with feeling like "I want to do it" on one out

of the 365 days, especially when Sendai-san might accept it. Even if it feels like I've become different from who I used to be, that's just how it is for today.

So, I'll make up my mind.

I'll return those muddled feelings of wanting to see, touch, or be touched, along with the penguin Sendai-san gave me, and decide not to engage in such things anymore.

I inhale deeply, then exhale. I pinch the penguin's beak.

Doing such things repeatedly would surely drive me crazy.

I don't need to rewind time to when I was eating instant noodles alone, but maybe I should go back to being the version of myself who didn't know the Sendai-san I saw atop the bed.

I release the penguin's beak, gazing at its expressionless face.

Once more, I touch its beak, hesitating over whether to kiss it. Instead, I toss its round body up towards the ceiling.

I Want to Keep Watching Sendai-san (II)

Part 272

"Miyagi, open up."

From the other side of the door, Sendai-san's voice sounds just as it always does.

The number of knocks varies—a single one, sometimes two—but they always happen. Even now, Sendai-san knocks before calling me from outside the door. Yet for some reason, I don't feel like opening it.

It's been about ten, maybe fifteen minutes since I went to check on her in the bathroom.

Sendai-san took a long time to come out, and instead of clearing my muddled thoughts, her absence only amplified them. I want to see her, but at the same time, I don't.

"Miyagi, I know you're in there. I'm going to open the door."

A thud resounds as the door is struck again. However, no sound of the door opening follows. It seems like a bluff, but not wanting the door to be opened without permission, I sit up from the bed.

"...I'll open it, just wait."

I tuck in the penguin for a nap, place the black cat on the bookshelf, and open the door.

"Your bath took forever. It's never this long."

Condensing thirty minutes' worth of complaints into one short line, I lightly kick Sendai-san's leg, dressed in her casual room outfit.

"I just wanted to relax for a bit."
"Why did you want to relax?"
"You could have joined me in the bath. You're going to take one now anyway, right?"

Instead of answering my question, she simply smiles.

"I'm not going in yet."
"I see."

With that, Sendai-san falls silent but doesn't go back to her own room. Whether she has something on her mind or not remains a mystery.

—But then again, that's just like her.

Sendai-san visits my room whether she has a reason or not, so this is her usual self. Yet she doesn't seem quite like the usual Sendai-san. There's something different about her standing before me. That's how I feel.

"Why don't you come inside?"

She carries a pleasant scent that, while similar to mine, is distinctly her own.

Despite not wanting to open the door, I have no reason to turn Sendai-san away. In fact, I want her to stay close. She is mine, after all, and should always be by my side, so I let her into the room.

"Aren't you going to let Roro-chan rest in bed?"

Normally she would sit on the floor, but today, Sendai-san sits on the bed and looks at me.

"It has a designated spot on the bookshelf."
"It'd be cute to let it sleep next to Pen-chan."
"It doesn’t have to be cute."
"Cute is better, don't you think?"

Sendai-san loves the word "cute." She quickly tries to turn everything cute. Sometimes, I find that part of her a little bothersome, so I change the subject.

"Do you like carbonara, Sendai-san?"

I ask her and sit on the floor, using the bed as a backrest.

"You had pasta for lunch, and you're thinking about pasta for dinner too?"
"No, I was just asking if you like it."

For lunch, I used some store-bought meat sauce pasta but had plans to make carbonara. However, I wasn't sure if Sendai-san liked it, and after checking the recipe, I doubted my ability to make it.

"What about you, Miyagi?"
"It's alright."
"I can make it for you sometime if you want."
"Can you make it?"
"I've never tried before, but I think I can if I follow a recipe."

Upon saying that, Sendai-san playfully tugs at my hair.

"I want to eat hamburg steak."

Forget about carbonara. If she's going to cook for me, I'd rather it be something other than carbonara, even if its not hamburg steak.

"You mean hamburg and pasta?"
"No, I mean for dinner."
"Ah, dinner. I want to grant your wish, but I might not have the ingredients. How about next time for the hamburg steak?"
"Anytime is fine, but I'd rather not have instant noodles tonight."
"Then let's make something other than instant noodles. By the way, Miyagi, you really like hamburg steak, don't you?"
"It's not that I particularly like it."
"Miyagi, you're always quick to deny."

Sendai-san comments in a soft, non-accusatory tone, tugging at my hair again. Somehow, my hair keeps getting pulled intermittently.

"What are you doing?"

In response to my question, she says "braiding," only to unravel it shortly after. Then, her voice falls from above my head.

"By the way, Pen-chan. It's about time you returned it."
"Why?"
"Because it's mine."

Sendai-san is right. The stuffed penguin lying on my futon is indeed

hers.

Exchanging it for an crocodile tissue cover was only temporary, something that inevitably required a return. It’s odd that I even asked, "Why?" Hence, I stand up and grab the penguin from the bed, pulling it out from under the futon to hand it over to Sendai-san.

"Return the crocodile later."

I had no hesitation in returning the penguin stuffed animal because I had wanted to return it along with all the vague feelings I had inside of me, like wanting to see Sendai-san, wanting to touch Sendai-san, and wanting to be touched by Sendai-san.

Yet, with a serious expression, Sendai-san asks, "Shall we keep exchanging for a little longer?" To which I firmly respond, "Take it."

"I’ll leave it with you a little longer. It seems like you’ve grown quite fond of Pen-chan, Miyagi."

Sendai-san's hand, which was supposed to have received the penguin, stroked my wrist, then the back of my hand. I realized that my hand was clutching the wing of the penguin that I was supposed to have given to her.

"I’m not fond of it."

I try to let go after squeezing the penguin's wing, but my hand won’t release it.

"It’s fine if you aren’t, but let’s make this penguin ours."

Sendai-san smiles softly and pushes the penguin back toward me.

"Ours?"
"Even if it’s in either room, it belongs to us both. You won it from the crane game in the first place, Miyagi, so it’s okay, right?"
"It’s not okay."

I decided to return the penguin along with the things that shouldn’t be inside me.

"Just hold onto it a bit longer."

Sendai-san lightly taps the penguin on the head. The penguin, now unofficially declared as belonging to both of us, I inadvertently take on responsibility to keep it. But my hand doesn't resist, firmly cradling it.

As a result, the confusing emotions linger within me, blurring the resolution I made not to do things like that again.

I shift my gaze to the penguin. Its cluelessly carefree expression meets my eyes. A small breath escapes me as I exhale, intending to set the penguin on the bed—but then, a familiar sweet scent draws near.

"...Why do you do this kind of thing?"

I ask Sendai-san as she unexpectedly embraces me, penguin and all.

"What kind of thing?"
"I'm asking why you're clinging to me."
"So I don't catch a cold after the bath."
"But I'm not warm."

Despite being someone who usually dislikes heat, Sendai-san holds me tightly, briefly responding, "I see," before adding, "Take good care of Pen-chan."

"...And what about my crocodile?"
"I'll return it later."
"Whenever's fine. Anyway, I'm hungry."

Even though the massive amount of pasta I made earlier has left me not very hungry, Sendai-san's warmth is now far too comfortable, and I fear the confusing emotions inside me might grow larger, so I push against her. Yet, she doesn't let go.

Her lips brush against my cheek and graze my ear. Then, she kisses my earring and nibbles gently on my ear.

"Stop doing weird things," I complain, giving Sendai-san's foot a light kick.

"It was just a kiss," she says.
"You bit me."
"I want to do more than just that," she whispers in my ear and

nibbles again.

"You're ridiculous. I want to eat. Let go."

I push her away with all my might. This time, she pulls back without resisting, and I press the penguin's beak to her lips.

"If you want to do that kind of thing, do it with a stuffed toy."
"A kiss?" she says, taking the penguin from me, clearly unhappy.

"And more," I retort.
"Isn't doing that with a stuffed toy a bit too weird?"
"For a pervert like you, Sendai-san, it's just right. Anyway, make us a proper dinner."

"Okay, okay," she responds, placing the penguin on the bed.

Chapter 94

I Want to Wait for Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 273

No matter how many times I look at them, my nails are always short. Snipped so short that there's no white part left, they hold onto today, even if it's just for a little while.

I wish my nails could always stay this short.

After a quiet sigh, I cap the bottle of nail oil I was about to open. I set it on the table and pull the crocodile lying on the floor closer, using the bed as a backrest. My room seems so vast without Miyagi.

She will probably not come by again today.

She initiated it, took things that far, and even awkwardly sat through dinner with me, giving such a concerted effort.

I shouldn't ask for more.

Wishing to be together longer, to sleep side by side—

I swallowed those words and simply wished her good night.

With another soft sigh, I glance at the nail oil on the table.

It was a gift from Utsunomiya, one that stirs a hint of jealousy in Miyagi, which is why I like it.

But today isn't the day for its intended use, nor does putting it on feel quite right even if it were one I bought myself. Covering today's memories of Miyagi with anything else feels wasteful.

I pat the crocodile on the head, then gaze at my fingers. On my short nails trimmed by Miyagi, I place a gentle kiss.

Raising the room’s temperature by one degree, I adjust it to what Miyagi might prefer.

It's mid-March, and as it's getting warmer outside, the days of needing the air conditioner are diminishing. Still, Miyagi will likely want to make the room warmer, and I'll end up complaining about the heat. I hope for such days to continue.

Even as my nails grow back to their usual length and daily life resumes as though today never happened, the mere continuation of ordinary days might bring another day like today.

Next time, the day could be when I come to understand Miyagi more deeply. But it wouldn’t matter if it’s another day like today where she initiates. If there comes a day when she wants to do it and vocalizes it again...

“That might be quite the challenge.”

Even if she thinks it, voicing it seems unlikely. Getting Miyagi to say she “wants” it out loud feels as improbable as getting a cat to say the same.

Lying down on the floor, I place the crocodile over my stomach and breathe slowly.

The cut-out top I got when my blouse got wet with soda, the blouse we exchanged at the cultural festival, the pendant marking ownership, the earrings from when we entered university—

The things I've received from Miyagi aren’t just “things,” they’ve become “special things.” Along with the penguin plush from the crane game; they’ve become "special things" she gave me.

I traded it for the crocodile.

And despite asking for it back, Miyagi never returned it. Her hand clung to the penguin tenaciously.

That's so unfair.

A Miyagi who doesn’t let go of my “special” thing treats me as “special.”

My mind tries to interpret Miyagi's actions that way.

"It's not wrong though."

I occupy this special place as Miyagi's roommate. It's right, not wrong.

And yet, we've become more than just roommates.

Miyagi would never admit it, but that's what things between us are. For Miyagi's sake, and my own, we continue to disguise it.

Sometimes, the word "roommate" almost crumbles or tries to morph into another word, but we live within that barrier, fixing it when needed to stay on course.

As long as we remain within this boundary, we can interchange "special" moments as "roommate" moments.

I let out a long breath and set the crocodile back on the floor.

—If only "special" could be quantified.

Exceeding a certain value would change something from being just roommates. If the world had such a mechanism, things would be clearer, and no courage would be necessary to change relationships.

"…It might be easier to teach a cat to talk."

A world where a meter to quantify "special" exists above our heads will never come. University has three more years, and there's no rush to change our relationship. Though there are complaints about being "roommates," there's no real inconvenience. There's little point in pondering such trivialities.

Excessive expectations invite unhappiness; I learned this. Expecting too many things from my family led me to betrayal, just as they were betrayed by expecting too much from me. It's better not to expect too much.

Standing up, I ruffle my hair, needing to cool my head a bit. Though I'm not particularly flushed, today Miyagi lingers too much within me.

I switch off the air conditioner, place the crocodile on the bed, and open the door to find Miyagi standing there.

“Eh?”

The shared space is dark, with no lights on. Like a ghost, Miyagi looks ready to flee, but I catch her arm, reaching out with my voice.

“What’s wrong? Didn’t you say you were going to sleep?”
“…I was thirsty.”

Murmuring what sounds like an excuse, Miyagi attempts to shake off my grip.

Something feels off. Her actions don’t match her words.

If she was thirsty, she should be by the fridge where drinks are kept. Her presence here seems solely to see me, so I tighten my grip on her arm, and a grumpy voice emanates from her.

“Why did you come out so suddenly, Sendai-san?”
“I wanted some iced tea.”

Though not actually thirsty, I craved something cold to change my focus. But what's more pressing is learning why she was lingering outside my door, prompting me to ask, “Did you want to talk about something?”

“…Tomorrow, it's off.”

Miyagi's arm slips from my grasp.

“Off?”
“White Day is off.”
“Does that mean nothing’s happening?”
“Yes.”

Before cooking the pasta, she specifically inquired about White Day plans, seemingly interested in spending the day together. Nonetheless, her mindset appears to have shifted.

“What will happen after it’s off?”

Nothing. That's what Miyagi should say, yet she’s silent. Instead, as

though filling the void, she grasps my sweatshirt.

“I’ll sleep all day tomorrow.”

With those words, she pulls me towards the shadows.

“Isn’t that a bit unhealthy?”
“…I can't sleep now.”

As she softly speaks, something warm and damp presses against my neck, and she gently nips at me. Miyagi tenderly bites into my skin, then pulls away. She presses her lips back, and sucks firmly.

To the marks left on me before eating pasta, and the many placed after, a new mark is added.

“Will this help you sleep?”

The light from my room illuminates Miyagi standing in the dark.

“I don’t know.”

Miyagi has undoubtedly changed. Yet she pretends not to notice, attempting to let today pass quietly. I can't say that's wrong, but I do want something in place of a canceled White Day.

“You can sleep tomorrow, but let me do what I want to do now.”

Knowing she won't say "okay," I lean in without waiting for a response. I kiss her, someone retreating once again into the confines of a "roommate," and bite her lips.

Miyagi's hand pushes me away. I hold that hand, firmly sucking at her neck. Once, twice. I leave marks that match those she left on me, and give her a bite.

“Ow.”

With a low voice, Miyagi forcefully pushes me away, so I leave one more mark and then back off.

I’m sincere in wanting to wait for a day when she desires it and can say it out loud. It's not that I don’t want Miyagi to do it to me.

But I can’t ignore my own urge to do it to her.

It's something like a reservation.

I wish to do to Miyagi what she did to me today.

I’m not sure when that will be, but it's a day I want to imprint on her.

“Let me cut your nails again, Miyagi.”

There's no rush. It can be on a day when Miyagi feels like doing it. I might make an effort to loosen her rationality, but I want to make Miyagi and myself truly equal.

I Want to Wait for Miyagi (II)

Part 274

"So, Sendai-chan, did you go anywhere during spring break?"

From my phone came the cheerful voice of Noto-senpai.

How unusual.

Senpai had called regarding a tutoring job, but even after addressing the main topic, the conversation hadn't ended. Normally, calls are brief and to the point, so it's rare for them to extend into a casual chat.

When we're face-to-face, conversations can be lengthy, but over the phone, Senpai tends to end the call without unnecessary chat, which makes this unexpected.

"About the only place I went was shopping for clothes."

I rise from my makeshift chair—the bed—and settle on the floor. My spring break was filled with various activities, some of which I couldn't tell Senpai, but the only planned outing was shopping with Utsunomiya.

"Didn't you feel like using your earnings to go on a trip?"

Dinner is still a ways off, and I have time. Miyagi is in her own room, so it's fine if the chat goes long, but this topic isn't ideal.

"Not really."
"Do you have any travel plans coming up?"

March is nearly over, and so is spring break. Even Senpai should understand that I don't have such plans, but I say, "No."

"Got any plans to travel with Miyagi-chan?"

I thought she'd ask. Judging from the flow of the conversation, Senpai was bound to bring Miyagi into it.

Traveling with Miyagi.

It's something I've occasionally hoped for. Yet, the idea of wanting to travel with her one day, be it near or far, is mine alone. I understand this, so I'd been trying not to think about it—until Senpai's suggestion started to turn my thoughts in unhelpful directions.

I pull the empty crocodile tissue cover closer and give its back a soft tap.

"No, I don't. I mean, why specifically Miyagi?"
"You're cohabiting together, so why not travel a bit?"

Senpai mentions cohabitation as if it's the most natural thing. I've mentioned multiple times that we're just roommates, but even so, she persists, so I no longer bother to correct her.

"Even if I were traveling with Miyagi, do you really want to hear about our trips?"

We've gone to the aquarium and the zoo together, but Miyagi isn't the type to accompany me anywhere on a whim. She has her own criteria for when and where she's willing to go, though I can't say what they are exactly. Still, it's clear that there are certain "times" and "places" that she finds acceptable.

Yet, talking to Senpai, I can't help but wish with the same casual ease she has in saying we're cohabiting, that Miyagi would travel with me.

"It sounds fun, so I'd love to hear. Mio mentioned she visited Sendai-chan's place and found Miyagi-chan quite amusing. If your travel stories are as entertaining, you must tell me."
"Mio just exaggerates. She's always blown things out of proportion."
"True. But if you're close enough to live together, then a little trip might be nice."
"I'll think about it."
"Make sure to report back on any travels."
"I doubt I'll have anything as entertaining as you expect, Senpai."
"It'll be fun, for sure. Oh, Mio's calling. Gotta go."

I have no idea where Senpai is, but just as she said, I hear Mio's

distant voice. True to form, she's making a fuss, asking who Senpai is talking to and insisting on joining the chat. Amidst the commotion, Senpai hurriedly tells me to think about the tutoring job, then ends the call.

With the disconnection, I release a sigh while staring at my now silent phone. The trips I cannot take are stored away in my heart as I refocus on what needs to be done.

From April, I'll continue tutoring Kikyō-chan.

I had meant to tell Miyagi about this decision, which had been made quite a while ago, when Senpai invited me to expand my tutoring work. I've resolved to accept the offer.

I need to tell her.

Adding a new tutoring gig to the one I've been meaning to mention makes my head hurt. Knowing Miyagi would have a displeased look on her face when I talk about work, I'd been putting it off, but now it's double the trouble.

Perhaps I've caught Miyagi's bad habit of procrastinating on unpleasant tasks.

"If it's one or two, it's all the same. It's all about work anyway."

Encouraging myself, I stand up. Even though I'm told I don't need permission for the job, I can't neglect mentioning it, since it will affect our meal schedules.

My heart feels heavy.

Mentioning it will sour her mood. Ideally, she'd take up a part-time job too, but thinking of her meeting new people and expanding her circle doesn't sit well with me. My emotions refuse to cooperate. With a sigh, I exhale.

"Time to head home."

Clutching the empty crocodile, I exit the room, stand before Miyagi's door, and take two deep breaths. After lightly knocking three times, I hear her say, "Come in."

"I'm returning this. Without the cover, it might catch a cold."

Upon entering, I place the crocodile next to Miyagi, who is sprawled on the bed reading a manga.

“A box of tissues can catch a cold?”

Miyagi closes her manga and casts a puzzled look my way.

"Yeah."
"...For someone who’s an erotic demon, you actually have a feminine side. You even name plushies."
"I’d say calling me an erotic demon is a bit overboard."
"If I had to choose between feminine and demonic, you’d definitely be the latter."
"You’re not one to talk, Miyagi. You’re just as much a perv."
"I don't want to hear that from you. Also, put this back."

The crocodile I had returned lands back with me.

"I came to give it back."
"Attach it to the tissue box."
"You're such a slave driver, Miyagi."

Though I complain, I attach the given crocodile back to the tissue box it belongs with. Sitting on the bed as usual, Miyagi sprang up with a start.

"I’m returning the penguin."

With a terse tone, the plush that was asleep on her bed lands on my thigh.

"You can keep it a bit longer."

Though I try to give the penguin back to Miyagi, she insists, "It’s fine. I'm returning it," in a sullen voice.

"Alright, I’ll take care of the penguin for now."

The penguin plush is shared between Miyagi and myself, something that belongs in either of our rooms. Accepting it seems fair. Now the crocodile is back with Miyagi, and the penguin is back with me, but the real topic I need to discuss isn’t about plushies.

They’re merely side matters.

"Miyagi. You know..."

I couldn’t find the words I needed to continue.
As I absentmindedly stroke the penguin’s head and exhale, Miyagi sat beside me.

“Sendai-san?”

As if piecing my broken sentence together, she calls for me.
Her mood isn’t terrible at the moment.
But knowing it will likely sour soon causes a slight throb in my temple.

“Well, um, about the tutoring job..."

Dropping my gaze, I focus intently on the penguin’s head.
Miyagi remains silent.
So I attempt to muster the words.

"I'll be continuing to teach Kikyō-chan from April."

"... But didn't you say she passed her high school entrance exams?" Miyagi murmured.

"She did, but they've asked me to keep coming. And I'm thinking of taking on another student."

"... I see."

Her flat response brought not just a throb to my temple but also a pang in my stomach. As I exhaled, the penguin seemed to be enveloped in a gray haze, and I slowly lifted my face.

"Is that okay?"

When I looked at Miyagi and asked, she looked away.

"You don’t have to ask me. Like I said before, just decide on your own if you want to."

I’ll continue working, regardless of her wishes. Her words about not needing permission are appreciated, given that my decision is set.

But it wasn't satisfying.

I'll keep working, and I don't plan to stop. Still, a part of me wishes Miyagi would tell me not to or say she wants me by her side.

Contradictory as it may be, I wish Miyagi would direct stronger feelings towards me.

"I can do the job then?"

I asked softly.

"... Sure, but it's annoying."

Miyagi said in a low voice, giving my foot a light kick.

"Annoying? Why?"

"It's annoying that you ask me for permission even though I told you to do as you please. It's annoying that you suddenly mention continuing with a student who's already passed her entrance exams, as if it's an afterthought. —My opinion doesn't matter, anyway."

As she openly expressed her displeasure, she stomped on my foot again.

"It's not like that."

"Whatever. Just make your own decisions about work. Maika's starting a job in April, too."

"Utsunomiya is working too?"

"She's going to sell hamburgers."

It sounds like Utsunomiya plans to hand-make hamburgers and sell them at the university or somewhere, but she's likely just taking a job at a fast-food joint.

"Utsunomiya seems suited for customer service, so it's probably a good fit."

"Maika's bubbly and cheerful."

Miyagi replied without looking at me. Her voice was still low, indicating her mood hadn't improved.

Perhaps Miyagi didn't like the idea of her close friend taking a job. After all, it would mean less time spent with her, making it hard to feel cheerful. Seeing Miyagi like this didn't leave me in a joyful mood either.

"Utsunomiya might get confessed to by a customer," I said, hugging the penguin plush tightly to suppress the darkness creeping into my thoughts.

"Does that really happen?"

"It does. Mio sometimes gets confessed to."

I tried keeping my tone light, prompting Miyagi to say, "Really?" as if talking to herself, while thumping her foot on the floor. Without glancing my way, she directed her voice at the penguin.

"... What about you, Sendai-san?"

"Not really."

Well, mostly not. My stint working in a café was brief, and customers rarely approached staff in that way. Still, it's not like it never happened at all. But since they were light-hearted pickup attempts rather than serious confessions, I didn't feel the need to share them.

"Does Mio-san date such people?"

Miyagi looked up from the penguin to meet my eyes.

"I've never seen her giving a positive response to any of them."

"Why? She invites people to mixers, so you'd think she wants a boyfriend, right?"

"Wanting a boyfriend doesn't mean she'll settle for just anyone. Besides, Mio doesn't seem to attend mixers just to find a boyfriend."

"What do you mean?"

"I think she enjoys the mixer atmosphere. She loves gathering everyone to have fun together. Probably more of a 'get lucky if someone nice comes along' kind of thing."

"Ah, I see."

Miyagi said, feigning disinterest, before unexpectedly suggesting, "... Maybe I should get a job too."

"A job? Where? You’re serious?"

She couldn’t be serious. I thought she was speaking without much intent, yet my incredulity scattered my thoughts, causing fragmented words to spill out.

"Maika is working, so I'll have more free time."

Miyagi muttered.

"Are you seriously considering getting a job?"

"Sendai-san, let's play rock-paper-scissors."

"That's not an answer to my question. Why the sudden challenge?"

"If you win, I'll get a job."

I couldn't gauge her seriousness.
But I couldn't believe Miyagi actually wanted a part-time job.
So I suggested a method to ensure I wouldn't win.

"... Miyagi, I'll throw scissors. You throw rock."

"That’s not even a real game."

Saying that, Miyagi gently bopped the penguin plushy with her fist in a mock punch.

Chapter 95

The Time Without Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 275

I bite into the second piece of fried chicken and swallow it down.

It's been such a long break that my body hasn't fully adjusted to being back at university. However, unlike me, Maika and Asakura-san seem to be thoroughly enjoying their lunch.

The spring break ended, university started anew, and we've become second-year students.

Before I knew it, everyone resumed attending lectures as if there never was a break. It seems I'm the only one who still longs for spring break. The bustling noise of the university cafeteria remains unchanged from before the break.

"Doesn't it feel like spring break ended too quickly?"

I swallow my sigh and direct the question to Maika and Asakura-san, who are eagerly consuming their food.

"Not at all. Didn't it feel incredibly long? If it were any longer, people might just turn into something useless," Maika responds lightly, skillfully twirling pasta onto her fork and taking a bite.

"It's nice to work a lot during breaks, but if they're too long, that's another issue," agrees Asakura-san, while eating her omurice. Yet, I can't agree with the two of them.

"A longer break would be better. I'd rather lounge around at home."

Looking around at the bright cafeteria, filled with glittering people laughing joyfully at who knows what, I can't help but feel out of place. If Sendai-san were here, she'd likely blend right in, laughing naturally in the crowd.

I don't dislike university, and being with Maika and others is fun, but unlike Sendai-san, I feel more comfortable at home.

"Shiori, not wanting to go out defeats the purpose of being a university student."

With a sound of exasperation, Maika's voice is followed by Asakura-san's.

"Miyagi-san, you really are an indoor person, aren't you? Isn't it hard to just laze around at home with someone else sharing your place? Oh, but Sendai-san probably doesn't lounge around, does she?"
"The only one lounging is Shiori, while Sendai-san seems pretty organized," Maika says with a chuckle, twirling more pasta onto her fork.

Their harsh words ring true nonetheless.

Even during breaks, Sendai-san maintains a more disciplined lifestyle than I do. Be it summer or winter, every break follows this pattern. Meals at proper times, cleaning, laundry, keeping her room tidy.

She is always organized and neat.

Both in appearance and in life, everything.

I don't think there's much discrepancy between the image people have of Sendai-san and reality. But there are parts of her known only to me.

The Sendai-san who lies on the bed, only I know her.

And again, I find myself thinking about such things with her—but—

"Shiori, you're zoning out again. Wanting more break doesn't justify being so absent-minded, does it?"

Called out by Maika, my attention, momentarily ensnared by thoughts of Sendai-san, snaps back.

This isn't the place to be thinking about such things.

"I'll focus for the Golden Week."

I voice a modest goal, biting into the fried chicken once more. Drinking down miso soup and bringing rice to my mouth, Asakura-san, who has eaten about half of her omurice, speaks up.

"Miyagi-san, aren't you planning to work during Golden Week?"

When university resumed and Maika mentioned she would be working, Asakura-san asked, "What about Miyagi-san?" I responded with the same words I use now.

"I'm not cut out for part-time work."

I had remarked to Sendai-san during spring break, "Maybe I should work, too," but that wasn't serious. She likely knew I wasn't serious as well, just a burst of frustration.

I don't want to hear about Sendai-san's part-time job.

And yet, I can't stand her not talking about it either.

This contradiction spurs unnecessary words from my lips. I don't expect her to stop working because of such comments, nor could I make her quit. Still, I can't help but voice pointless remarks.

"Aren't you bored staying home all the time?"
"With Sendai-san around, I'm sure Shiori's covered."

Maika answers before I have the chance, adding, "There must be plenty to do." But Asakura-san, still curious, looks at me and asks.

"Room-sharing doesn't mean you spend the entire day together, does it?"
"Our rooms are separate, so it's not like we're together every moment, but we often do things together."
"Oh, I see. But I still can't believe you and Sendai-san are sharing a room. It's hard to imagine what conversations you two have."

Asakura-san, echoing words I've heard before, takes a bite of her omurice.

"Speaking of, didn't Sendai-san pick up more part-time work? Since you'll have more alone time, how about working too, Shiori?"

"Where could I work?"

I detest part-time work.

I have no desire to do it.

Even so, I can't throw a tantrum and outright refuse here.

"How about joining me? Let's sell hamburgers together. They're recruiting."
"I can't do customer service."
"Then how about the café where Sendai-san worked?"
"That's customer service too."
"Busted. Then how about tutoring?"

Playfully suggesting a job, Maika continues, and I respond with "Absolutely not."

Indeed, it's impossible.

Tutoring is something I particularly dislike, so much so that, even if I were more capable than I am now, I wouldn't do it. Yet, Sendai-san increases her tutoring jobs.

I gaze down at my own fingers.

Even though I thought I knew her better than anyone, it isn't enough.

As I know Sendai-san more deeply, she penetrates my thoughts more profoundly. Mentioning her name in casual conversation connects everything back to her.

"Everyone's working, it's boring."

I exaggerate a sigh.

I don't like an empty house, but during high school, being alone was nothing unusual. But now that part of me, accustomed to solitude, has vanished, and I wish for Sendai-san to always be around. This makes what should be ordinary seem unacceptable.

On days when she has a part-time job, she just comes home late.

I've never been able to forgive that since she started working there, and now I can't forgive it any more than before.

At times like this, I wish I had my blue scarf.

If I grip it tightly, I might feel a little more calm.

"If you find it so boring, you should really consider working too, Shiori. Working together with me might be fun."
"I'm fine being with Maika, but work is impossible."
"Even if you don't work now, what about after graduation, Miyagi-san?"

With a serious look, Asakura-san turns to me.

"Well, I'll have to get a job."
"Oh, that face says you're really not looking forward to it."

Laughing, Asakura-san comments while taking another bite of her omurice and finishing her plate.

"Maybe Sendai-san could support you," Maika casually suggests.

"Our room-sharing is only until we graduate though."
"Why not live together after finding jobs? Sharing the rent would make life more comfortable."

My heart wavers at the future Maika nonchalantly proposes.

Forever.
From now on.
Even after graduation.

If I'm with Sendai-san, my home becomes a place where "someone is there." The future beyond university graduation is blurry, its color and shape indiscernible. I can't imagine myself working, nor am I sure if I even can secure a job. Yet, I can envision a home where "someone is there."

"...That's true, but that wasn't the arrangement," I sigh softly before finishing off the rest of the fried chicken from my lunch, pushing it all into my stomach.

The Time Without Sendai-san (II)

Part 276

I'm used to being alone.
But being alone is boring.
Food doesn't taste good, and because it doesn't taste good, I can't bring myself to cook anything decent.

I exhale quietly, all by myself in the shared space.

Instant curry and cup ramen.
I've already cooked rice, but dealing with the dishes after eating curry is a hassle.

"Cup ramen will do," I decide.

I pull out a cup ramen from the stash I bought with Sendai-san and place it on the table. Then, I heat up water in the electric kettle we bought together.

After university, Maika and Asakura-san disappeared to their part-time jobs. Even when I return home, Sendai-san isn't here and won't be back for a while. The time I have now is the same as it was when I was in high school, and I'm quite familiar with how to spend such time.

Reading books, playing games.
If I feel like it, I could even study.
There's a fair amount you can do alone.
In fact, until recently, I was spending my time like that.

I take barley tea out of the refrigerator and pour it into a glass. After taking a sip and placing it on the table, I prepare chopsticks and a black cat chopstick rest.

I wish I didn't get hungry.

Cup ramen isn't what I want.
This feeling strongly reminds me of Sendai-san, emphasizing how essential she is to me.

It's no good.

I clench my hands tightly and then open them.
I drink half of the barley tea.

Thinking about her in an empty house like this makes my head ache. Something I never used to care about, like meals, is now becoming something I can't ignore.

The kettle finishes boiling, so I peel off the shrink wrap from the cup ramen and lift half the lid. I pour the hot water into the cup, set the kitchen timer, and sit down.

Sendai-san, who should be sitting across from me, will be late because of her tutoring job, so something usually unseen becomes visible. It’s not that I particularly want to talk to her, but being alone makes the three-minute wait seem longer.

I stroke my growing nails.
Pull on my index finger.
Try pulling the middle finger.
I press my fingers tightly and let out a breath.

I drop my gaze to the black cat chopstick rest.

When I think about how the calico cat that’s always here isn’t, I feel lonely. The kitchen timer rings, and I start eating the cup ramen.

It doesn't taste good.
Meals that merely fill the stomach are dull after all.

Before I know it, the cup is left with just soup, and I wash up and return to my room.

There’s truly nothing to do when I’m alone.

I turn on the light, make a small circuit around my room, and sit on the floor with my back against the bed. I’m so bored that I apply the lip balm Sendai-san chose. It sticks on my fingers when I touch my lips. When I lick my fingertips, it tastes different from Sendai-san.

I take a tissue from the back of the crocodile.
I intend to wipe my lips but stop.

I roll the thin paper in my hand into a ball and toss it towards the trash bin, but it falls short, prompting a sigh. Picking up the unmotivated paper scrap and tossing it into the bin, I grab three manga from the bookshelf. Then, snatching the crocodile that had been inhabiting Sendai-san's room, I leap onto the bed.

I can't spend time alone effectively.
I can't seem to make use of my time.

All the barley tea I kept in the fridge disappeared easily into my stomach, yet the time alone refuses to vanish. No matter when or where, one hour should be sixty minutes, yet sometimes it becomes thirty or ninety. Today seems to be a ninety-minute-hour day, and Sendai-san is taking her time returning home.

I know.

I know that an hour doesn't become ninety minutes just because she's not here. Today, like any day, an hour is sixty minutes, and tomorrow will be the same. Nevertheless, waiting for someone makes time drag on. No, it doesn't change for waiting for anyone else.

That's why it's irritating.
Only Sendai-san stretches or shortens my time.

I hit the crocodile's head and pull out another tissue.

I roll it up and toss it towards the trash, but the white lump doesn't reach the bin. Just like before, the paper scrap, lacking wings to soar, drops just a bit away from the bed.

"Spineless," I mutter.

I place the crocodile on my belly and close my eyes.
I have no desire to get up to throw away the trash.
I roll over.

It doesn't really matter that Sendai-san has more tutoring jobs. One more student is no big deal. But thinking there might be even more soon unsettles me.

More unseen students, people who will monopolize Sendai-san's

time. I can't shake off this feeling of unease when there are more people using Sendai-san's time, a time that isn't mine.

I cover myself with a blanket and curl up.
Time passes while I'm unable even to doze off, and I hear two soft knocks on the door.

"Miyagi."

Her pleasant voice calls me.
But I don't want to get out from under the covers.

"Are you in there?"

Of course, I'm in here.
I couldn't possibly be anywhere else.

"Miyagi, may I come in?"

She says that, but she doesn't open the door.
Sendai-san doesn't come in unless I say it's okay.

"Did you eat?"

She asks from the other side of the door again. Sendai-san, so courteous, keeps speaking to me from the door, making it hard to ignore her. I set the crocodile on the floor, dispose of the fallen trash, and tell her, "Come in," and the door opens.

"I've already eaten."

I say as I sit back on the bed, and Sendai-san, naturally, sits next to me.

"What did you eat?"
"...Cup ramen."
"Didn't you say something similar yesterday? You should at least try to cook something, even if it's simple."
"It's fine. Cup ramen's good."
"It's not fine. It's bad for you. Eat something a bit more substantial."
"I'm alone; it's too much trouble to make something just for myself."

"Then wait for me to get back. I'll make something for you."
"Sendai-san comes back late and I'll get hungry."

I’m not such a terrible person that I’d make Sendai-san, who's working part-time, cook dinner. And a cup ramen fills me up, so I wish she’d just leave me be. Besides, if she's so concerned about my meals, she shouldn’t work a part-time job.

"I see."

Sendai-san says softly, gazing at me.

"Miyagi."

She calls me with a gentle voice and smiles. As she extends her hand, I slap it away, which makes her say happily, "You're wearing the lip balm," to which I coldly reply, "So what?"

"You're cute."

Sendai-san only ever says things I don't want to hear at times like this. Her defiance irritates me, so I grab her clothes and pull her close. I press my lips against hers and bite down gently, careful not to hurt her.

"Ouch."

When our faces part, she feigns injury. Then, as if it were a rule, she leans in for a second kiss, and I push her away.

"I want another one."

She whispers, closing the distance between us.

"No."
"So stingy."

As if to reject what I had heard, I kick Sendai-san's leg. What I want to hear from her isn't words like "cute" or lines like those.

"...Sunday."

I mutter under my breath and kick her leg again.

"Sunday?"
"You don't have work, right?"

Even as I ask, I regret it.

"I don't," she replies.

I reach out to touch her blue earrings.
The regret doesn’t disappear.
Even so, I let the words I meant to swallow escape.

"...Let's go somewhere together."

I murmur, and when I glance at Sendai-san, she looks like she's about to ask, "Where to?" So, I gently press my lips to hers.

The Time Without Sendai-san (III)

Part 277

"Where are we going today?"

Sendai-san gently placed her chopsticks on the calico cat-shaped chopstick rest and asked. As I cursed my past self from a few days ago, I took a bite of my breakfast toast, slathered in butter and jam. After slowly chewing and swallowing, I refrained from looking at Sendai-san as I posed my question.

"Where?"

"We're going out today, aren't we?"

Her lively voice returned my question with a question of her own, yet I found myself unable to respond.

I must have been out of my mind back then.

I'm not the kind of person who would tell Sendai-san that I wanted to go somewhere together on a Sunday. Being alone at home for so long had made me a bit strange, causing me to say something odd. If I could, I'd swallow those words like I do with toast, making it as though they never existed at all. But words that have been spoken can't simply be devoured and vanished into thin air.

"Isn't there anywhere you want to go, Miyagi?"

Sendai-san wouldn't let me get away with saying nothing.

"...No."

I reluctantly gave a short reply and took another bite of toast. If it were Maika, I could easily list several places I'd like to visit. But when the other person is Sendai-san, nothing comes to mind.

"So, can I choose then?"

When I looked at Sendai-san, who didn't get upset at my

indecisiveness, I saw her smiling from across the table, having eaten half of her toast and half of her salad.

"Wherever you want to go is fine, Sendai-san."

I passed the responsibility of today's plans back to her.

"Let's see... How about the zoo or the aquarium?"

"Why would you want to go somewhere like that?"

"If we're heading out in the morning, shouldn't it be somewhere reasonable? Besides, didn't we promise to go together?"

"I never said anything about going in the morning, and I'm not in the mood today."

"Well, we don't have to go to the zoo or aquarium. How about starting in the afternoon?"

"...Actually, let's not go anywhere."

I reclaimed the right to decide what was now my plan and communicated my intention. Morning or afternoon makes no difference. Since there's no job monopolizing Sendai-san's time today, I won't end up alone here. So, staying home seemed like a good option.

Here, I can do what I want whenever I feel like it.

Moreover, even though I originally had the notion of going somewhere, I couldn't think of an alternative to the zoo or aquarium, nor could I come up with a place Sendai-san might find appealing.

"You were the one who suggested going out on Sunday, so take responsibility for it, Miyagi."

Dismissing my suggestion, Sendai-san took a sip of orange juice.

"I don't have anywhere I want to go."

"Then let's go eat something. We haven't had a leisurely meal together in a while."

Apparently, "not going out" wasn't an option for her. Even though she goes to university and works part-time, she still wants to go out on her days off instead of relaxing at home. Despite not having mentioned going anywhere this Sunday since then, she wouldn't give up on the idea. So, I relented and asked, "What kind of 'something'?"

"Hamburg steak?"

She said, chewing on her toast.

"Do you want to eat that, Sendai-san?"

"I thought you might want to."

"What about something you want?"

In these situations, she never shares her own desires. She prioritizes me, setting her own preferences aside.

I don't dislike that about her, but every now and then, I'd like her to express what she truly wants. Yet, Sendai-san never volunteers such information.

"Well... Maybe pudding, or cheesecake?"

"Is that really what you want to eat, Sendai-san?"

I recall that she has mentioned liking cheesecake before, but she doesn't seem eager to eat it now.

"I know you like it, Miyagi."

As expected, that's her reply. She never says her true thoughts. Even when asked, she never offers genuine answers, so it's hard to get to know her beyond what I already do.

All I have imprinted in my memory are things like the feel of Sendai-san's lips or the softness of her chest — things that can be understood through touch alone.

"It doesn't have to be what I want to eat."

I took a large bite of my toast. Tossing the remaining crumbs into my mouth, I savored the taste I wouldn't have known if it weren't for her.

"Since you were the one who suggested going out on Sunday, let's go with what you want, Miyagi."

It wasn't the most exciting suggestion, so I stuffed my mouth with salad instead. As I chewed on lettuce, I searched for a suitable answer for us to share for a meal.

Cakes and parfaits danced in my mind, with pancakes swirling around. Yet, none of them quite clicked.

After another bite of salad, I voiced the final dish that came to mind.

"…French toast."

Since Sendai-san had gone out of her way to buy the ingredients and make it before, it shouldn't be something she dislikes.

"Alright, then French toast it is. Oh, and please come with me to buy new nail polish."

"What?"

"You're free anyway, right? Plus, you said, 'Sendai-san's choice is fine,' remember?"

"I did, but—"

"Then, do me this favor and come with me."

Sendai-san smiled, making a decision about my schedule without my input.

"Throwing that in is sneaky."

"If I told you upfront, you'd never leave the house, Miyagi."

Her words weren't entirely wrong. Yet, if I were to firmly say, "Absolutely not," she would comply. She'd cancel the tentative plans and spend the day with me at home. I know that's the kind of person

she is, but today, it's hard to voice it.

"...As long as we come back right after we buy the nail polish."

I was the one who proposed this plan. Complaining about the additional shopping felt childish.

"That's absolutely fine."

Sendai-san gave a beaming smile. She's in a good mood today. Not that she's ever really in a bad mood, but the extent of her cheerfulness today is almost unsettling.

I emptied my salad plate and poured the bright orange liquid into my stomach. Placing the glass back on the table, I noticed Sendai-san had also emptied her plate.

"Miyagi."

Her voice was even brighter than before, and I couldn't shake a sense of foreboding. Before even heading out, the prospect of what could further improve her mood seemed ominous to me.

"Once we clean up, I'm coming to your room, okay?"

"...Why?"

I had an inkling of what was to come but felt compelled to ask.

"I'm going to help you pick an outfit and do your makeup."

"No way."

"Oh, come on."

"I don't need it. We're just having a meal and running a quick errand. There's no need for all that."

Whenever there's something going on, Sendai-san always insists on doing my makeup or helping me choose an outfit. If she wants to get dressed up, she should keep it to herself, but she always tries to do something for me too.

It's annoying. Yet, in moments like this, she doesn't relent. She's

truly a hassle.

Why did I ever suggest going out together on a Sunday in the first place?

"Since we're heading out, just let yourself get dressed up and made up."

As expected, Sendai-san smiled, looking quite pleased. Reflecting on the day I suggested we go out today, I wished that version of myself could be tossed into the boiling cauldron of hell and simply melt away.

I looked at Sendai-san. She was indeed in a good mood, savoring her orange juice.

Chapter 96

Even If the World Changes, Miyagi Remains Unchanged (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 278

The fact that Miyagi was the one who suggested it would change the world.

Despite her complaints, she got on the train and even stepped into a slightly fashionable café. If I were the one to suggest going out on a Sunday, this would not be the outcome.

She would have remained rooted in her room, steadfast like she had grown roots into the floor. No matter how much I urged her to step out, she would not budge, and might have just turned into a grand tree in her spot.

"This is different from what I imagined."

Across the table, Miyagi, who narrowly avoided becoming a plant, says this with a frown etched on her forehead. Even after arriving at the café, her mood does not improve.

But today, even if Miyagi seems to be in a slightly bad mood, it doesn't bother me. In fact, it makes me happy. The fact that she came out with me despite her reluctance proves this, making the frown lines on her forehead twice as adorable as usual.

"How is it different from what you expected?"
"It's not sweet."

She says in a slightly lower tone, poking at the bacon-topped French toast with a fork.

"Since it's substituting for lunch, I thought it would be good if it were more of a meal, but would you have preferred it sweet?"

What's on the table is, as she said, not the sweet type. I had looked up a place reputed for their delicious French toast and brought her here, but it seems it might not match her preference.

"I don't mind either way..."
"But?"
"—I just thought it’s different from the ones Sendai-san makes."

Miyagi’s statement is not wrong.
The French toast we are having now is crisp on the outside, soft on the inside, and so tasty that the sizable pieces of bacon pair perfectly with the bread, leaving me wanting another plate. But unlike the French toast I make, it isn't sweet.

I look at Miyagi. I expected her to definitely say it was delicious, yet the expression on her face is nothing but displeasure.

And I find myself feeling joy in her dissatisfaction.

Though we are at a place reputed for its food, she compares it to the ones I make, remembering and considering them. That's something that pleases me beyond words. For her to claim it’s different from what I make is incredibly endearing.

"Shall I make French toast another time?"

I ask Miyagi, who still has her brows furrowed as she eats the bacon.

"…Whenever you have time."
"Alright. Then I’ll make it on our next day off."

Miyagi doesn’t affirmatively say “yes,” but her face suggests she might eat it without a frown if I did make it. I cut the French toast into small pieces and savor it alongside the bacon before taking another bite and sipping my iced tea. Across from me, Miyagi continues to silently eat her French toast.

There’s not much conversation. The mound of French toast quickly diminishes.

Though she complains, she's eating it quietly, which confirms she's finding it delicious. Initially, I thought today's outing was only enjoyable for me, but I like to think that perhaps Miyagi is also finding some enjoyment in it.

Miyagi graciously kept her promise.

Thanks to that, seated across from me is Miyagi, whom I've dressed up to look incredibly cute. It was worth applying makeup to her when she was looking exceptionally displeased. Seeing her in the skirt I picked out for her adds a special touch.

"Sendai-san, it's hard to eat when you're staring."

Miyagi complains while cutting her bacon.

"Sorry, you're just too cute."
"Stop saying weird things and eat."

Her look says she would have kicked me if we were at home. Regardless of location, Miyagi is strict about being called "cute." I apologize with a "okay, okay," and take a large bite of the French toast.

The glass-walled and liberating space we're in is relatively empty, likely because it's past noon. The chatter that echoes around mixes with the background music and fades away.

The ambiance is pleasant. A delightful meal paired with the adorable, albeit a bit irritable, Miyagi whom I crafted. Hopefully, she'll be the one to invite me out next time.

—Though, that may not happen for some time.

"Hey, Miyagi," I begin, wanting to indulge a little since these moments are rare.

"What?"
"Can you tuck your hair behind your ears?"
"No."
"Show the earrings."

I voice my small hope to the instantly responding Miyagi. I want to see the earrings I picked out for her.

"It's fine, because from my angle, I can see Sendai-san's earrings."

Miyagi comments, glancing at me with my hair tied in a ponytail

before she continues to eat her bacon.

"That's not what I mean."
"But it is."
"I think it'd be cuter if you tuck it behind your ears."
"Sendai-san, you're annoying."

Her response to my suggestion about being "cute" isn't particularly positive. I don't understand why she detests being called cute so much, but overdoing it seems like it would lead to her mood turning irreparably sour, so I decide to stop. However, ending the conversation here would be a waste, so I introduce a new topic.

"Speaking of which, when your birthday comes this year, you'll turn twenty."

I look at Miyagi with a smile.

"It'd be strange if I suddenly became twenty-one."
"Well, that's true."
"What happens when I turn twenty?"
"When your birthday comes, how about celebrating together by having a drink?"

With my birthday in August, waiting for Miyagi's birthday in September would allow us to enjoy alcohol together for the first time.

"Instead of that, can't it be like last year?"

She gives a curt response.

"You're turning twenty, it's a memorable occasion, don't you want to do something special?"
"No need to make a big deal out of everything that's a supposed milestone."
"Well, okay, we don't have to drink together, but promise you won't drink with anyone else until then."

"Why? It doesn't matter who I drink with."

Predicting her response, I stubbornly stab the French toast with my fork. I quickly eat and take a sip of iced tea before returning my gaze to Miyagi.

"…Because I worry."
"Worry?"
"Because I don't know what will happen when you drink. Some people act different when they do."

I don't know if Miyagi can handle her alcohol or not. She might not change at all when she drinks, or she might.

Either way, Miyagi doesn't seem like the cautious type, and that makes me uneasy.

While I doubt she's one to go drinking with boys, if there were ever a time when she did go out drinking— I'd want to drop everything and rush over to her side. Even if her drinking companions were girls, I wouldn't feel comfortable sending her off without knowing how she'd fare in that situation.

To put it simply, I don't want her drinking in environments with anyone at all. Yet, not attending the same university makes it difficult for me to enforce that. I'd even wish for Utsunomiya to keep an eye on her for me, but I can't ask her to do that.

"If you're going to say that, then I don't know how you'll be when you drink either."

We are similar in the fact that neither of us knows what we're like when drunk, but there's a crucial difference. I have no intention of going out drinking with anyone other than Miyagi. Therefore, my case isn't as important. But it does present a small reason why Miyagi and I should drink together.

"Yeah, because I want you to know what I'm like too."

If she's concerned enough about me to feel a tinge of jealousy, she should have at least some curiosity about how I behave when I've had a drink.

I stare intently at Miyagi. Our gazes lock, but then she averts her eyes to the French toast. Her lips part, and her voice, soft enough to be swallowed by the background music, finally reaches me.

"...I'll think about it."

Her response is tentative, but it's better than nothing. There's plenty of time until her birthday. I don't need a definitive answer right now.

I finish my plate and take a sip of iced tea. Miyagi also clears her plate, chewing on the last bite of French toast before finishing off her iced tea.

"Next, we'll go shopping."

At my words, Miyagi makes an obviously displeased face, but I have no intention of altering our plans. Smiling brightly at her, Miyagi firmly states, "Just buying nail polish and then we're heading home."

Even If the World Changes, Miyagi Remains Unchanged (II)

Part 279

I want it, but I don't really need it.

That's pretty much how I feel about nail polish—it's not something I must buy today.

And yet…

Today, the act of going out to buy nail polish is necessary, and Miyagi must keep the promise she made with me.

"Sendai-san. Have you decided which one you're going to buy?"

Standing in front of the shelf lined with nail polishes, a voice more disgruntled than when she was eating French toast comes from beside me.

"Not yet."

I cast a glance at Miyagi, who looks bored.

Nail polish is just an excuse to keep dragging her around after lunch. It could have been clothes, notebooks, or a stuffed animal—anything would have sufficed, but nail polish popped into my head at that moment.

"What do you think is good, Miyagi?"

I ask to prolong the time spent doing something together. If left to her own devices, she might say, "I'm going to look at something else," and disappear somewhere.

"Anything's fine."
"That's way too unhelpful."
"Well, it's not for me anyway."

Miyagi is the type of person who conforms to expectations when you want her to defy them, and defies them when you want her to conform. Today is the former, and as expected, she shows no interest in nail polish. But I'm fine with that.

If choosing nail polish was the primary focus, I would have come with Mio instead of Miyagi. Mio would likely pick it more seriously.

"Even if it's not for you, put a little more thought into it."
"I couldn't tell even if I did."
"Then, if you were to choose, which one would it be?"
"I wouldn't pick because I don't use it."

Yeah, makes sense.

I lower my gaze to Miyagi's fingers. Her nails are neatly trimmed, but they're bare. The day she touched me deeply, they were just as plain as today. The length hasn't changed. They were cut just short enough to avoid being too short.

Reflecting on the past isn't good.

Even though I know that, my thoughts drift back to the day Miyagi cut my nails. I can't help but wonder if her nails were cut short that day for what we did together.

No good.

Thinking like this, I end up interpreting Miyagi's actions in my favor, only to conclude in an unsatisfying way that it probably wasn't the case.

—Miyagi's nails are never long.

I lift my gaze from her fingers to her face.

"You should use nail polish sometimes. I'll pick one for you."
"I don't use it, so you don't have to pick one."
"Then, want to use mine?"
"No. Mind if I go look somewhere else?"

There are plenty of stores that sell nail polish, but if we go to a place with nothing but cosmetics, Miyagi will want to leave immediately. So today, I chose a general store, hoping I could keep

her with me after buying nail polish.

Thus, she should stick with me, and it would be troublesome if she wandered off around the store alone.

"I want to look around together later, so at least stay close while I pick nail polish."

At my words, Miyagi furrows her brow and glares at the shelf. She takes a bottle of nail polish and hands it to me as if pushing it away.

"How about this one?"

She handed over the nail polish rather forcefully.

"It's fine, but why this color?"

Out of all the nail polishes, Miyagi chose this color—a pale pink.

I gaze steadily at her face rather than the nail polish in my hand.

"You don't like it?"
"I don't mind, but why?"

I want a reason.

It didn't seem like she chose it with much thought, so for that very reason, I wish there were at least some reason behind it.

"… You're into cute things, right?"

Miyagi mumbles softly.

"I do like them."
"If you like it, then it's fine, isn't it? I'm going to look around elsewhere."

With the matter apparently concluded, Miyagi turns her back on me. She's truly selfish.

"I'm going to buy this, so come with me."

Normally, I'd say, "I'll go pay, so wait here," but today is different. I grab her arm and pull her along.

"Why do I have to come with you?"

The voice trailing behind me sounds like something you wouldn't expect to hear on an outing.

"What if you get lost?"

It feels like if I let go, Miyagi might just head home, so I can't let go.

"I'm not a kid; I won't get lost."
"But I might, right?"
"As if!"

Miyagi speaks in a low voice.

"There are a lot of people, and if you're not careful, you might get lost."

When I say that, she doesn't seem entirely convinced, but Miyagi falls silent. We queue up at the end of the checkout line and gradually move forward.

"I won't go anywhere, so let go of my arm."

A voice filled with displeasure reaches my ears, and I let go. Before I know it, it's our turn, and I complete the transaction. As we step away from the crowd, Miyagi lightly pushes my arm.

"You're annoying."
"Since we're already here, I want to look at things together if there's anything you want to see."
"Your shopping is done, let's go home."
"Wait. You said you were going to look at other things earlier, so isn't there something you want to see?"
"Not really."
"Even if there isn't, let's have a look."

There's no response, but her calm demeanor seems to indicate she's accepted my proposal.

Mugs, stuffed animals.
Necklaces, earrings.

This shop is full of things that can pass time just by looking. As we leisurely stroll around together, sometimes Miyagi stops to say, "Cute," or "Maika would like this," but I can’t tell if she’s enjoying herself.

Though there are some unwelcome comments, being with Miyagi makes up for it. After all, Utsunomiya isn't to blame.

I overlook the jealousy that isn't exactly small and trail behind Miyagi.

To most people, it probably seems like nothing significant happened today.
But for me, it's an important day.

Strolling through the store with Miyagi.

These seemingly trivial moments are so enjoyable that I find myself not wanting to go home, even if I feel a tinge of jealousy now and then.

"Sendai-san, you're creeping me out."

Miyagi, who was looking at aroma oils, raises her head and remarks.

"Huh, why?"
"Because you're trailing behind me like a stalker."
"Harsh choice of words, don't you think?"
"Walk in front of me."
"I want to see what you’re interested in."

Just as I smile at her, a cheerful voice calls my name from behind.

"Sendai-sensei!"

Upon hearing the familiar form of address, I turn to see a high school student I meet with every week.

"Kikyo-chan."
"I almost didn’t recognize you with your ponytail."

I’m not sure where she came from, but it’s my tutoring student, Kikyo-chan, answering with a smile.

I'd rather not have been noticed. Meeting her while Miyagi's around, considering how she holds a grudge against my tutoring job, isn't ideal. However, since I was noticed, it's not like I can just ignore her now.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Kikyo-chan. I almost didn't recognize you. Did you come with your friends?"

"I was with some friends, but we just parted ways."

"I see."

I plaster a smile on my face and turn to Kikyo-chan, but her eyes shift to the person next to me. Her gaze is filled with curiosity, and I get a sinking feeling.

"Um, are you the cat pencil case roommate?"

The Christmas gift I received from Miyagi is mentioned by Kikyo-chan. Her eyes, shimmering with interest, remain fixed on Miyagi.

Miyagi stands there, silent. Though she doesn’t speak, a palpable discomfort emanates from her.

Miyagi can be impulsive, but only with me. With others, she behaves sensibly, and I know she won't act out of line now. Still, I feel uneasy, like a tight wire is constricting my windpipe.

"Yes, my roommate. We just had lunch together," I reply lightly, smiling at Kikyo-chan. Miyagi looks as if she wants to say something, but without a word, she turns to Kikyo-chan and speaks in a voice neither small nor loud.

"Nice to meet you."

I wasn't expecting an argument, but her polite greeting brings a sense of relief.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Hanamaki."

Kikyo-chan's voice is slightly higher than usual.

"Miyagi."

Miyagi's tone remains unchanged. When I look at her, her expression reveals neither happiness nor displeasure. I'm curious about her thoughts, but I can't ask now—and she likely won't answer later.

"I'm glad to finally meet you. I've wanted to for some time," Kikyo-chan says.

Miyagi gives an ambiguous smile in response.

Even If the World Changes, Miyagi Remains Unchanged (III)

Part 280

"I want to meet her at least once."

These words from Kikyo-chan weren't just said once; I've heard them multiple times. Each time, I would put on a smile and give an uncertain response, so I don't know why she wants to meet Miyagi.

"Um, thank you."

An unexpected "Eh?" from Miyagi follows Kikyo-chan's bright voice.

"I heard from Sendai-sensei that you helped pick out my pencil case. That's why I wanted to meet and thank you."

Her cheerful face and lively voice are directed not at me but at Miyagi. The friendly atmosphere I feel when I tutor her weekly hasn't changed. However, her pitch is a little higher than usual, so she might be nervous meeting someone for the first time.

"It's nothing worth thanking me for. More than picking it out for you, I was just tagging along. I didn't pay for it or anything, so you don't have to worry about it."

Miyagi's tone is more cheerful than when it's just the two of us.

"I heard the cat pencil case for Sendai-sensei was chosen by you, Miyagi-san? I was told it was a Christmas present, and it's cute."
"I don't think it's that cute."
"It's cute."
"…Thank you."

As I glance at Miyagi's troubled expression, the usual wrinkle between her brows is absent. Instead, the corners of her mouth are slightly upturned as if someone tugged a string on her lips.

The reason might be the word "cute."

"Do you tutor as well, Miyagi-san?"
"I'm not into that. I'm not good at studying."

Miyagi's tone sounds a bit stiff. She attempts to create a softer atmosphere than when it's just us, yet it feels dry and crumbly, like a sponge cake devoid of moisture. The air feels dry, making my throat ache.

This isn't good.
This topic is bad.
It's a conversation that should be ended.

"Miyagi isn't the type to work part-time."

Gently, ordinarily.
Always calm, always kind.
I'm used to handling these situations, so neutral words and tones come naturally.

"Oh, I don't want to either. Seems like I'm similar to Miyagi-san."

The conversation doesn't stop.
Kikyo-chan's interest continues to be directed at Miyagi.
Miyagi's expressions are starting to fade.
And I'm getting a headache around my temples.

We each have our roles. If they were labeled on our foreheads, mine would read "Tutor," Miyagi's "Tutor's Roommate," and Kikyo-chan's "Tutor's Student."

Though we fulfill our roles quietly, the atmosphere feels off. It's not stagnant, but neither is it refreshing.

"That's the case."

Miyagi's voice is neither low nor bright.

"I'd rather play with friends than work."
"That doesn't make you the same. Miyagi spends most of her time at home."

I intercept the conversation with a light tone even though it seems futile.

Quickly, move away from this talk of work.

It's not a topic suitable in front of Miyagi, so any mention of part-time work should be discarded onto the store's floor and kicked far away.

"Is that so?"

Kikyo-chan asks Miyagi instead of me.

"That's how it is."

Miyagi's dry voice reaches me, and Kikyo-chan asks, "Then what do you do at home?"

How did it come to this?
My heart feels heavy as if filled with stones.

I wondered why Kikyo-chan wanted to meet Miyagi, but I had a bad feeling and deflected the topic away. It would have been a hassle if an outrageous reason came up. I figured they'd never meet, and I had no intention of introducing them, so avoiding it with a smile seemed best.

But now—

No wise person should court danger.

Those words should be ignored, as I wish I had listened to why Kikyo-chan wanted to meet Miyagi. Had I known her reasons, this situation might have been avoided.

I swallow the sigh I almost let out.
Next to me, Miyagi offers an imprecise answer to the question about what she does at home.

We can't continue this aimless conversation indefinitely.

Kikyo-chan is a charming student I have no intention of treating harshly, but this situation isn't good. My nerves can't take it, and I sense Miyagi's brow reaching its limit.

"Kikyo-chan, you're quite interested in Miyagi."

I move my facial muscles to smile gently.

"I've been curious about what kind of person Miyagi-san is after hearing stories from Sendai-sensei."
"…Stories?"

Miyagi fixates on a trivial detail, making my stomach twist with anxiety. If this continues, the conversation will veer into trouble once again.

This isn't the Kikyo-chan I know.

Normally, she's quite perceptive and surely must sense the subtle tension.

"I heard you have tons of manga and often watch anime with Sendai-sensei."
"Is that what you've been telling people?"

Miyagi's words pierce my eardrums.

"Well, more or less."
"I want to try room-sharing when I get to university."
"Then, Kikyo-chan, let's aim for university and keep studying hard."

I allow my lips to curve and respond with a soft voice.
I don’t want her talking with Miyagi any longer.

"It'd be nice if Sendai-sensei could come more often."
"We'll see about that."
"Okay."

I feign a regretful expression, telling Kikyo-chan, "We have plans, so we better get going."

"Alright."

Kikyo-chan, still bubbling with energy, responds with "See you," and I wave goodbye.

"Miyagi, shall we head out?" I call, stepping forward.

As we take a few steps, Miyagi strides past me, exiting the shop. She

walks ahead on the sidewalk, not knowing our destination.

I pick up my pace.
Walking nex to her.
The wind, unusually warm for April, grazes my cheek.

The town, not yet dusk, feels dusty but calm. In contrast to the oppressive, gray-stained atmosphere earlier, it’s comforting. But Miyagi seems unaffected, her brow deeply, deeply, deeply furrowed.

"What plans? We didn't make any," Miyagi says, her voice unabashedly low.

"It’s our plan—to see a movie," I tease.
"We made no such plan; I'm heading home. If you want to watch a movie, go with that girl."

Though I’m aware, Miyagi has never referred to Kikyo-chan by name.
She knows it but avoids it, neither calling her Kikyo nor Hanamaki.

"I'm just joking about the movie, but how about we look around a bit more?"
"I'm going home."

Miyagi speaks while dodging people coming from the opposite direction.
I match her stride to avoid being left behind.

The sky is blue, with not a cloud in sight. It seems like the perfect day to go out with Miyagi.

But the overly warm wind feels uncomfortable, and I find myself touching my neck.

I brush the dust away, trying to ward it off, and then grab Miyagi's arm, as if she might bolt at any moment.

"Then, how about the bookstore?"
"We didn't plan on it, so I'm not going."

Miyagi responds firmly and takes a large step forward.

Chapter 97

Things I Want to Say to Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 281

I never promised to watch a movie.
Nor did I promise to go to the bookstore.
And I definitely did not promise to meet up with someone described as a random student.

Nonetheless, Sendai-san, who refuses to release her grip on my arm, continues to chatter away beside me. Words like "Wait" and "Miyagi" are thrown my way, only to be swallowed by the bustling noise around us.

"Miyagi, hold on a moment."

Sendai-san calls out to me once more, but I can't bring myself to stop.

Ever since we left the shop, she has been repeating my name. I do respond, but the surrounding clamor makes it impossible to tell if my replies are actually being heard correctly.

The crowd is inconvenient.

People approach from the opposite direction and from behind. Conversations from a distance transform into a murmur that seeps into my mind. I can't focus on anything, with this persistent noise tightening around my head.

"Miyagi."

A sharp voice cuts through. I know why she's not being gentle; it's because I won't stop walking. While moving doesn't necessarily uplift my spirits, it's something I can't bring myself to stop.

"Miyagi, for goodness' sake."

If only that voice, like the one calling out to her student, could simply disappear.

I quicken my pace, but so does Sendai-san, ensuring her grip on my arm remains firm. Her voice clings to me, blown along by the wind.

It's unsettling.
Everything is unsettling.

I look straight ahead.
I avoid looking up.
The sky, aggravatingly bright and pleasant, offers no solace.

"Miyagi, stop for a bit."

Desperate to shove away a voice trying to penetrate my defenses, I divert my attention outward.

Amidst a lively street, focusing on trivial noise — footsteps, ringing phones, faint music — turns the chatter and the sound of racing cars into one amalgamated noise, drowning out Sendai-san's voice.

Yet somehow, inexplicably, her words slip through, isolating themselves from the rest of the noise, ringing in my head.

"I feel bad about what happened with Kikyō-chan. I didn't expect to meet her there, and I didn't think she would bombard you with questions. I'm sorry. But she's not a bad kid."

That's not it.
Sendai-san's misunderstanding.

Whether that girl is good or bad isn't the point. Her unexpectedly approaching me and speaking so cheerfully with Sendai-san caught me off guard—

Compelled to stop, I do so abruptly. Startled, Sendai-san lets out a surprised "Wha—" before continuing.

"Miyagi, give a heads up if you're going to stop."
"Sendai-san."
"What?"
"I'm going to the bookstore."

"Huh?"
"I said I'm going to the bookstore."
"Didn't you say you wouldn't?"
"You want to go to the bookstore, don't you?"
"I do, but... why this sudden change of heart?"

That girl really isn't something to worry about.

Her friendly demeanor threw me off because it didn't align with someone I'd just met. But since we probably won't cross paths again, it's best to forget today altogether.

I feel a bit uncomfortable about Sendai-san tutoring her the same way as when Sendai-san was tutoring me, but she won't do the same things as she did with me.

They open textbooks and study.
That's all there is to it.

Thinking otherwise would be strange.

"It's not that I've changed my mind. I just remembered there's a manga I need to buy."

The fact we're neither going to see a movie nor head to the bookstore would remain unchanged whether I met Sendai-san's student or not. But if we went straight home, it might seem like a reaction to meeting that girl, potentially giving Sendai-san the wrong impression of jealousy.

Avoiding such a misunderstanding is essential.
I don't want to behave in ways that would reinforce false perceptions.

"Do you really have a manga to buy?"

Turning a questioning gaze my way, Sendai-san tries prying information from me. I pull away her hand that's clinging to my arm and shift my direction. Our destination is a bookstore, simply because Sendai-san mentioned it.

But I'm unsure.

"…Where are we?"

I glance around.

"Well, who knows. I'd like to say that… But considering we simply kept walking straight, I assume there's no bookstore nearby."

Her voice neither cold nor warm, Sendai-san adds, "Shall we search for one?"

"The bookstore?"
"Yes. If you really want to go, I can look it up for you."
"I can find it myself without your help, Sendai-san."

I have my phone. Locating a bookstore won't be an issue.

"Is it worth going to such lengths?"

Having asked this, Sendai-san surprisingly answers her own question.

"Let's just head home."
"Why?"
"Because I want to relax at home."

She smiles reassuringly, her voice soft.

"Miyagi, it's alright."

"What is?"
"I don't know. It's just a feeling."
"If you don't know, stop saying random things."
"Random or not, it's fine, right?"

Sendai-san's hand reaches mine.
A firm grip, she tugs gently, guiding me as she walks on, ponytail swaying.

A glimpse of a blue earring, distinctively hers, complements the hairstyle. I don't mind it, but the thought that others might notice something only I should know makes me uneasy.

"Why the ponytail today?"
"I just felt like it."

A vague response escapes her. Honestly, I would mark her today preventing such a hairstyle if I could.

"Sendai-san, are we really heading home?"

Gripping her hand firmly, I inquire. The answer, "Yes," comes clearly, loosening my hold. Yet, her hand remains entwined with mine, warmth radiating between us.

To my dismay, Sendai-san refuses to recognize trivial matters as what they are.

She extends emotions I never needed, magnifying them into something significant — revealing things unseen, only to challenge me with them.

Messy, filthy, feelings I'd rather dispose of.

Yet, she makes me aware of their presence.

"Let go of my hand."
"No."

A snap response meets my elevated gaze.
The sky is still untouched by sunset hues.
Inappropriately warm for spring, a breeze teases her ponytail.

It's not something I should say after suggesting it myself, but going out is really not a good idea. It ruins what could have been a calm, pleasant day staying quietly at home.

Hence, accompanied by regret, I exhale deeply.

Things I Want to Say to Sendai-san (II)

Part 282

At the end of our clasped hands, Sendai-san is chattering away.

I'm trying to gather my thoughts, unsure of what to say, but she keeps rambling on, making it hard for me to focus.

She's talking about that calico cat she often sees, or about the unsweetened French toast we had for lunch.

Filling in the silence with safe topics chosen from countless possibilities, she leaves my mind feeling numb, and all I can do is make small acknowledgments.

We get on and off the train.
The sun loses its strength, and the color of the sky changes.
We walk the catless sidewalk, and home draws near.

Sendai-san continues with her safe conversations, unchanged.

There's no obligation for me to speak, but with nothing else to do but nod, I find myself distracted by thoughts about the face I saw that I didn't need to know, and about this other student I have yet to meet.

Sendai-san's voice doesn't linger in my head.
All that remains are feelings I want to turn away from.

Even in front of the entrance, as I unlock the door and take off my shoes, Sendai-san keeps talking about trivial things.

"Are you listening, Miyagi?"

As we step into the shared space, I hear Sendai-san's gentle voice.

While debating whether to head to my room, I reply with a simple "Yeah," and she naturally places her bag on the table. Then she starts boiling water with the electric kettle. Two mugs are set on the table, and I sigh before preparing tea bags.

"Miyagi, you know..."

Before sitting down, Sendai-san comes over, looking at me.
Her voice feels heavy, and I want to cover my ears. I sense if I respond, it might lead to something unpleasant, but I've already missed the timing to retreat to my room.

"...What is it?"

I reluctantly speak, staring intently at the mugs.

"I'm sorry about today."

She doesn't specify what she's apologizing for, but I have a vague idea.

"There's nothing for you to apologize for, Sendai-san. You don't need to apologize twice."

She's likely referring to the "student of Sendai-san" we encountered at the store.

"I should apologize."
"Why do you think that?"
"Because you're upset, Miyagi."
"I'm not upset."
"Not even about me sharing things about you?"
"I don't care about that."

I'm curious about the details of the various "things," but asking would inevitably lead to her talking about that student. Hearing about topics I don't want discussed in her voice is simply unbearable.

"Do you dislike Kikyō-chan, Miyagi?"
"It's not like that."

She's not someone I categorize as liked or disliked. I don't want to sort her into either box, nor do I want to think about her.

"...Then, perhaps," her voice drops slightly.
It gives me a bad feeling, prompting me to shift my gaze from the mugs to her.

"Are you upset because... you're jealous—"
"I'm not, so go to your room."

I interrupt her unfinished sentence and deny it.
Her tutoring job doesn't concern me.
Therefore, the students don't concern me.

Her part-time job is not something I should interfere with, so there's no need for her to be noisy or to apologize.

When she brings up matters I'm trying to forget, I find myself at a loss for words again. It's like the enjoyable and unenjoyable parts of the day are stirred together, making my emotions feel lost. Continually mixing feelings I want to separate leaves a bad taste.

"How about the tea?" Sendai-san quietly asks.

"I'll make it."
"For both of us?"
"I'll make it and leave it in front of your room."
"Why not drink it here together?"
"I'm not drinking."

I reply coldly to her gentle smile, but she doesn't change her expression, speaking to me in a soft voice.

"I want to drink together with you, Miyagi."
"If you're here, I'll go to my room."
"Don't say that, just sit down."

Before I could turn away, she grabbed my arm, pulling me. Though it wasn't a strong force, her intent not to let me go to my room was clear. But even so, there's no need for me to follow her words.

"No."

I briefly respond, peeling off her hand attached to my arm, but she doesn't give up. She pulls out a chair, taps its backrest, and smiles again.

"If you sit, I'll do something you like."
"What do you mean?"
"You like having your feet licked, don't you?"

Accusingly, Sendai-san says it, looking at me.

"I don't like it. Rather than that, the water is ready. If you want tea, then make it."
"You don't have to hold back since you're wearing a skirt."

Sendai-san, who said she wanted to drink tea with me, abandons her task and redirects the conversation to an unnecessary place.

"The skirt has nothing to do with it."
"It does. It's easier to lick your feet if you're wearing a skirt."

As she says this, Sendai-san presses on my shoulders, forcing me to sit in the chair.

Infuriating.
Truly infuriating.

I attempt to rise from the chair I didn’t wish to sit in, but Sendai-san quickly kneels down before me.

This is something that has happened many times before.
I've had Sendai-san sit on the floor and lick my feet.

Even if my mind seems stirred, it's a memory easily retrieved, one I cannot forget.

"Stand up; don't do unnecessary things."

It's not an order, but I tell her and nudge her leg.

"It's fine if I don't stand."
"It's not fine."

I nudge her again, and she grips my leg with a painful firmness. This is nearly unprecedented, so I assertively say, "Let go," yet instead, she lifts my skirt above my knees.

"What are you planning to do?"

Instead of a response, her lips meet my knee. The warmth and softness surprise me with how naturally they meld into my skin. Still, I cannot accept her lips.

"Stop it."

On a day like today, I don't want to be touched by Sendai-san. Yet she doesn't stop. With her lips pressing against my knee, I feel the tip of her tongue. She licks, retreats, and then presses on again.

"Sendai-san!"

I strongly call her name, pulling at her bangs, which makes her lips retreat. She raises her face and smiles.

"You're too loud. You don't need to shout that much for me to hear."
"If you heard, then stop."
"If you want me to stop, beg me by saying, 'Please stop'."
"Absolutely not."
"I figured you would say that."
"Just stop it."
"Absolutely not."
"Sendai-san!"

Calling her firmly again, her fingers touch my knee. Her fingers trace the places her lips were, as if declaring possession, then she languidly licks.

"It's disgusting."
"You mean it feels good."

Without lifting her face, she states this, placing another kiss on my knee. Her fingers unroll my socks, caressing my ankle.

"Why do you do these things?"

As I push against Sendai-san's head, her body moves away, but she quickly grabs my leg again. Her fingers trail along my calf, her lips brushing against the top of my foot, soon followed by the tip of her tongue.

Kisses are repeated countless times, her tongue tracing over my skin. It's both unsettling and strangely pleasant. The warmth of her body brings back unwanted memories, tangled with the orders of the past.

Sendai-san on the bed.

Our mingling warmth.

—No.

This is not something I should be recalling now.

"Sendai-san, give me an answer."

I still haven't heard the reason for these actions.

"...Because you're in a bad mood, Miyagi."

She murmurs, lifting her head.

"I'm not in a bad mood. Just not in a good one."
"It's the same."
"It's not the same, and whether I'm in a good mood or not shouldn't matter to you."
"I want things to be better for you, though."
"Licking my feet won't improve anything."
"Then, what should I do?"

Sendai-san's voice isn't particularly soft or harsh; it's somewhere neutral.

Things I Want to Say to Sendai-san (III)

Part 283

As much as I don't mind having Sendai-san lick my feet, I'm not in the mood for it right now. I suspect she realizes this much as well.

There's nothing I particularly want done to me.
There's nothing I specifically want to do.
I'm not in a bad mood, so I don't need a way to improve it.

But if I absolutely must ask for something, there is one thing I'd like.

"…Undo that."

I point to Sendai-san's ponytail as she sits on the floor of the shared space.

"My hair?"
"Yes. Get rid of the ponytail."
"Will that improve your mood?"
"Even if it doesn't, just undo it."

Upon my curt demand and a kick to her knee, she lets her hair down, without any hesitation.

"Is this better?"
"No. Make sure your ears aren't visible."

Although Sendai-san is no longer sporting a ponytail, her hair is tucked behind her ears, displaying the blue stone earrings that mark her as mine.

"…Why? Isn't it better if they're showing?"

Sendai-san's voice carries a hint of dissatisfaction.

"It's not better, so make them invisible."

There is no one here but me. I'm the only one who can see her earrings, yet even if they were out of sight, she's still mine. So for

now, I prefer those blue stones to be hidden, along with the emotions I don't want to see.

"Hurry up."

I give her knee another kick.

"Ouch."

Her voice lacks emotion as she says that. I respond, "Then follow my instructions if you don't want to be kicked," and she hides her ears.

"And your mood?"
"Normal."
"That's normal?"
"It's normal."
"I see."

Sendai-san lets out a small sigh. Then, resting her forehead on my lap, she mutters softly.

"…I don't know what Miyagi is thinking."
"I don't get what you're thinking either. Licking my feet to please me is weird, isn't it?"
"Is it really that weird?"

Her small voice reaches me, though I can't see her face.

"There's no need to lick them without being ordered."
"It feels like something that belongs to Miyagi, doesn't it?"

Her voice contains no discernible emotion. It's fitting for someone as enigmatic as Sendai-san, yet it also makes me curious about the expression she's hiding.

I want her to raise her face.
I want her to say it while looking at me.
But I'm afraid something bad might happen if I see Sendai-san's face right now, so I refrain.

"Pervert."

I say quietly, prodding the crown of her head.

"Give me an order. I'll do whatever you say."

Sendai-san makes no move to raise her face. I can feel the warmth from her through my knees, but that's all.

"You don't have to say things like that."
"Is that an order?"
"It is. And put on a normal face and stand in front of me."
"What kind of order is that?"
"It doesn't matter what kind. Just listen to it."
"…Okay, okay."

Her voice returns to its usual tone, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Her forehead leaves my lap, but soon her fingertips lightly touch me, and her warmth flows back.

"I said to stand up."
"I know. I'll follow the order."

While I don't really want her to follow my orders, giving her one is all I can do now. This kind of thing is closer to 'the usual us,' keeping me from having to invite her out or meet people I don't want to meet.

"If you understand, then stand up quickly."

I say briskly, and Sendai-san stands up begrudgingly. She asks, "What next?" but I don't plan on answering.

I silently get up from the chair. I move close to Sendai-san's neck, pressing my lips to it, returning the warmth from my knees.

Once, twice.
I kiss her neck repeatedly.

"Not going to leave a mark?"
"No."

I answer briefly, pressing my lips against her neck slowly.

I don't want today to leave a mark on Sendai-san.
So, I won't leave a trace.

Instead, I kiss repeatedly, returning the warmth she gave me, taking

it back once more.

"Wouldn't it be better in bed than here?"

Sendai-san, always saying unnecessary things, wraps her arms around my back, and I press against her shoulder.

"It's not like that."

I take a step back and step on her foot.

"Then what is it?"
"…It doesn't mean anything."
"Then make it mean something, get in that kind of mood."
"Impossible."
"What makes it impossible?"

She's always saying unnecessary things.

There's no deep meaning behind what just happened, nor do I intend to make one. Naturally, there's no reason for my answer to be 'impossible.' If she asks about something that doesn't exist, it puts me in a difficult position. I need to silence her when she's like this.

"You're noisy, Sendai-san."

I push against her stomach, trying to prevent any more pointless questions. But, quickly finding an answer is difficult.

Asking questions might suppress her questioning; however, she sometimes doesn't answer them directly.

In that case, I could use the electric kettle to make tea and let both the time and her chatter wear themselves out.
But despite my thoughts, my mouth moves on its own.

"…What's important to you, Sendai-san?"

It's probably not something to ask right now.
I know, but today seems like the only chance to ask.

"Important to me?"

It's not entirely unexpected.

I once heard something related when Maika joined us on an outing. Sendai-san, who often shares the same preferences as me, said she 'might like' something I don't particularly like, so the memory stuck, and I'm aware it's correct.

Studying.

More accurately, it's teaching rather than studying itself, so it might be considered important rather than merely liked. Sendai-san enjoys teaching, and I've benefited from her lessons as well.

"Yes. What's important to you, Sendai-san?"

Sendai-san stares at me, then her gaze drops to the floor.

No words come.
Her gaze doesn't return.
She looks steadfastly at the floor, not at me.

I don't necessarily think that important things and favorites are synonymous, but if the answer were 'tutoring students,' I wouldn't want to hear it.

Inside me, Sendai-san's 'favorites' continue to smolder.

Still, her voice doesn't reach me.
Reluctantly, I follow her gaze to the floor, where she quietly murmurs.

"…This place, maybe."

Her unexpected answer eases some tension, though I can't fully accept it.

But it'll disappear after graduation, won't it?

The words almost escape my lips but stop.

"What about you, Miyagi? What's important to you?"

Sendai-san's question echoes back, shifting my focus from the familiar place where we spent considerable time cooking and cleaning together back to her.

"—Hamburg steak."
"Eh? Hamburg steak?"
"Make it."
"Now? And, what's your important thing?"
"I just answered."
"You answered with hamburg steak, but that’s a favorite, not something important."

She kicks at my feet, sounding somewhat exasperated.

"It’s pretty much the same thing."

Both Sendai-san and I sometimes give vague answers when asked questions, so I guess we're both at fault here.

"Well, hamburg steak it is, then. You really do love it, Miyagi."
"I don't care about that. Just make it."
"We don't have the ingredients."
"Then go buy them."
"You could've mentioned that earlier. We should have stopped by the store."

It might be a bit too late to go shopping for ingredients and make hamburg steak. But I really want to eat it today.

Absolutely.

Chapter 98

Where Miyagi Is (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 284

"Hazuki, aren't you getting tired of hamburg steak? You've been eating it all the time lately."

Words I heard just yesterday spill from Mio's mouth. So, I respond with the same line as yesterday.

"Not really."

Having the same conversation as yesterday, we find ourselves once again in the university's café space. On the table are a half-eaten hamburg steak and two-thirds of a taco rice bowl, our meals unchanged from yesterday.

The only difference is the time; yesterday was during the lunch rush, while today, we're dining together long past the bustling lunch hour.

"Are you planning on eating hamburg steak again tomorrow?"
"Probably."

Demi-glace, cheese, mushroom. Today it’s grated radish hamburg steak.

Even something like hamburg steak comes in a variety of styles, so if you rotate them, you'll never get bored. April is coming to an end, but even if I continue ordering the same menu until Golden Week, I don’t think I'd get tired of it.

Besides, Mio, who’s chiding me about my lunch choices, has been eating taco rice three days in a row, so she shouldn’t be one to talk.

"If you eat that much hamburg steak, your brain might turn into one."
"If that's the case, wouldn't your brain turn into taco rice?"

"Sounds delicious. If you run out of things to eat, I'll share my special taco rice with you, Hazuki."

With that, Mio took a big, delighted bite of her taco rice.

It's just like her. If her head were full of taco rice, she wouldn't care, and she'd probably share the taco rice in her head with me.

"I'll pass."

The taco rice concocted in Mio's mind seems like it could change the eater's personality to be exactly like hers. Her easygoing, carefree nature is charming, but if asked whether I want to be like that, my answer would be no.

"Too bad, it's delicious."

In a tone that didn't sound the least bit disappointed, Mio said, "By the way," and continued.

"Why did you suddenly start liking hamburg steak? You didn't eat it that much before."
"I'm trying to make delicious hamburg steak."

I give a response that isn't exactly right but isn't wrong, either, and take a bite of my hamburg steak.

The taste of the hamburg steak here isn't bad, and it's affordable while filling. However, there's not enough grated radish on top, so if I were going to make it for Miyagi, I'd increase the amount.

"What's that about? Do you have someone you want to make it for?"
"It's for Miyagi."

There's nothing to hide, so I answer honestly. Though, it's not entirely accurate.

While it's true I have someone I want to make it for, and that person is Miyagi, the core reason for my fixation on hamburg steak isn't there.

Miyagi said hamburg steak was something important.

That's the main reason. If something is important to her, it is also

important to me.

That's why, ever since that day when I cooked hamburg steak for Miyagi, I've been eating nothing but hamburg steak. And ever since then, even though Miyagi never asked me to make it again, I've been making it countless times for her.

"You could've at least given me a more exciting answer. I thought you might say it was for your boyfriend."
"Mio, you knew I wouldn't give you that kind of answer when you asked."
"True. Does Shiori-chan like hamburg steak?"
"Enough to suddenly demand I make it for her."
"Then she really must love it."
"I figured if I'm going to make it and eat it, it might as well be delicious."

The things that are important to Miyagi and me don't overlap.

There are times I feel disappointed about that, but I've come to accept the status quo. As long as the place I live with Miyagi is maintained, and she remains there, that's enough. I don't desire anything more because wishing for more would be futile.

Even so, Miyagi's words about hamburg steak being important, and her actions of requesting me to make it, hold significant weight. Her words and actions keep me eating hamburg steak.

We don't progress, but we don't regress either. Always standing in place.

As long as that place is still home, it's fine to stand still. I can continue to compromise with a relationship that won't improve.

"You two have such an incomprehensibly good relationship," Mio said thoughtfully before taking another bite of her taco rice. Then, after chewing, she added, "But eating so much hamburg steak every day might make you gain weight."

"I'm making a decent effort, so I'm fine."
"Really?"
"More or less."

I smiled and then picked up my chopsticks to eat the hamburg steak.

As talkative as Mio was, she continued to eat her taco rice, and our conversation paused. But the silence didn't last long.

"So, what's the hamburg steak maniac Hazuki planning for the long weekend?"

Golden Week is approaching. Even without asking, I could predict what words would follow such a question at this time of year. So, I tell her about the unchangeable plan I have.

"Tutoring."
"That's another boring answer. It's a long-awaited break; why not go out somewhere? People are asking for me to bring you along."

Mio doesn't forget to continue eating her taco rice with a spoon as she talks.

"I'm busy with work."

While some teachers and students take a break from tutoring during Golden Week, neither my students nor I are taking a break. We plan to continue studying through the holiday.

When I mentioned this to Miyagi, she made a sour face but didn't tell me not to go.

That's good, but also a bad thing. Despite wanting to go to work, I actually want Miyagi to stop me and tell me not to go. I realize I'm being selfish, but Miyagi's lack of interference makes me feel restless and uneasy.

"Why not go all out and expand your social circle during this opportunity?"
"I don't need to go 'all out.' Having Mio is enough for me."

I directed a broad smile at Mio, who seems to know just about everyone.

There's no falsehood in my words. When someone approaches me at the university, I respond with a smile, and I do sometimes hang out with people other than Mio. However, I'm not intent on expanding my social network here; I prefer staying within a limited circle.

"You always say things like that. It makes me happy, though."

Mio said, unusually embarrassed, before clapping her hands and turning curious eyes toward me.

"Aren't you spending time with Shiori-chan during the break? You should go do something."
"The way you're putting it, it sounds like Mio plans to come along."
"Of course, I'm definitely going. Where should we go?"
"Well, I have work, and Miyagi doesn't leave the house, so we probably won't be going anywhere."

To be precise, I don't want to let Miyagi go anywhere.

She probably has plans to go out with Utsunomiya during the break, but I wish to cancel even that. Presumably, Utsunomiya also has work during the holiday so they'll likely meet less often, but still, I'd rather they not meet at all.

Last year, Miyagi left marks on me, keeping me confined to the house. So, I think it's only fair if this year, I keep Miyagi confined at home. Like last year, I want to fill the golden moments of the holiday with watching movies and doing makeup together in that house.

Miyagi should just stay home and eat the hamburg steak I make.

"Your tutoring sessions won't last the entire break, right? You should bring Shiori-chan out into the sunlight."
"If Miyagi is forced outside, she'd turn to ash."
"She's not a vampire. Just tell Shiori-chan she should come out with us."
"Well, I'll mention it at least."
"Convince her."
"Don't expect a positive response."

If I could use persuasion as a command with Miyagi, I would have done it already. But it has no effect. If she were someone who listened to me, we wouldn't merely be roommates by now.

"Isn't Shiori-chan kind of too cold? She needs to be more amiable if she wants to be an idol."
"She's not the type to aim for idoldom."

Miyagi is adorable. I love making her even cuter.

And while I enjoy going out with her and would love for everyone to know how charming she is, part of me wants to keep her all to myself. So, having her aspire to become an idol would be troubling.

I take a bite of the hamburg steak that Miyagi loves so much.

"Hazuki, what are you really doing for the holiday?"
"If I find myself with some free time, I'll let you know."
"Which means, you're never going to contact me."

Mio said, heaving a theatrical sigh.

Where Miyagi Is (II)

Part 285

I held no particular grudge against hamburgers, yet a growing resentment began to take shape.

Miyagi hadn't returned home yet.

This was the root cause of the negative emotions hamburgers seemed to elicit—essentially, it was a form of misplaced anger. If I were to delve deeper into these feelings, I would reach Miyagi's friend.

Utsunomiya Maika sells hamburgers.

To be precise, she's working part-time at a fast-food restaurant, and Miyagi had contacted me to say she would return home after stopping by that restaurant.

With my smartphone in hand, I wandered from my room to the shared space and settled into the chair that Miyagi usually occupies.

Pictures taken during the school festival, snapshots from the zoo, and even photos taken in this very house.

My smartphone was filled with Miyagi; looking at her photos never bored me. Although I was disgruntled by her absence, it was tolerable. Deep down, I craved the presence of the real Miyagi, not just the ones on my phone's screen, but there's nothing I could do about her absence.

I heaved a deep sigh.

Although I hadn't expected to meet Miyagi immediately upon returning from university, hearing that she'd taken a detour was displeasing. More so because her destination was Utsunomiya's workplace.

There was no message saying she'd be having dinner outside. Yet, Miyagi was probably going to eat hamburg steak.

To be precise, it would be the hamburgers Utsunomiya sells at her part-time job. While anything that sandwiches a patty between buns is called a hamburger, the ground meat patties closely resemble hamburg steak, so it seemed fair to lump them into the same category.

I found myself brooding over such trivial matters, indicative of just how irksome I found Miyagi's detour, and the urge to vent my frustration on hamburgers manifested.

I knew it was a pointless act, though.

"What should I do about dinner?"

I wasn't particularly hungry, but it was already a reasonable time to start preparing dinner. Still, the idea of cooking seemed bothersome.

No matter how much effort I put into preparing a dish, without Miyagi, it wouldn't taste good. If everything tasted bland regardless, resorting to cup ramen seemed a viable option. It struck me that I was becoming more like Miyagi, but cup ramen was quick, left no mess, and was perfect for when I was lacking motivation.

"Wait, do we have any left?"

I recalled seeing Miyagi indulge in cup ramen the other day after coming home from work. I couldn't remember if that was the last one or not. With my memory unclear, I set my smartphone aside and checked the pantry.

"There's nothing."

I sighed again and sat back down in Miyagi's chair.

If only Miyagi had been home, such a mundane issue as a lack of cup ramen wouldn't have disheartened me this much. It was genuinely frustrating.

It was fine if I returned late from work, but it was unacceptable for Miyagi to be late from visiting her friend's workplace.

I couldn't help but be disillusioned by these selfish emotions, yet ever since I met Miyagi, such emotions have been continuously

taking hold. They've definitely been growing larger, becoming something that can't be easily managed.

After what happened with my family, I lost the impulse to cling to others or take a keen interest in them, but Miyagi existed in a separate sphere.

Although I had many friends in high school, it was all superficial, with only memories of interacting with them behind a pasted smile.

Despite entering university and meeting Mio, who might become akin to 'Utsunomiya to Miyagi' for me, that was all it felt like. Though I thought it was fine to get closer, I couldn’t muster feelings deep enough to strengthen such bonds. The hassle attached to Mio’s ‘social connections’ outweighed any potential benefits.

Miyagi is the only one who is special; the only one I need.

Nonetheless, if I intended to continue living with Miyagi in this house, I needed to persist with university. If I were to stop attending, my parents would stop assisting financially. If I wished to continue living together beyond that, I’d need a job and money to maintain this space, and thus, it was necessary to keep a certain level of interaction with others.

It's all such a hassle.

Yet, even if it's a hassle, I can't discard everything except Miyagi. Plus, eating is essential for living.
Though it's truly a hassle, it's best to have dinner.

Perhaps I should have Miyagi pick something up on her way home.

Though her face often bore a perpetually sour expression, she would at least oblige if I asked her to get something.

Grabbing my phone from the table, I sent a message saying, "It's a hassle to cook for just one person, so please get something for dinner on your way back." A reply came back quickly.

"What about my meal?"
"Aren’t you going to have a hamburger there?"

Returning a question with a question, I received no reply.

Not knowing what exactly had gone wrong, only that something had, left me contemplating whether to send another message until, unexpectedly, I received a call from Miyagi.

"I never said I was having a hamburger."

A displeased low voice emitted from the phone.

"Didn't you go to Utsunomiya's workplace?"
"Why would you assume I'd eat a hamburger just because I went to Maika's?"

"Wait, doesn't Utsunomiya sell hamburgers?"
"Does Sendai-san eat hamburgers every time she goes to a place that sells them?"

The conversation wasn't aligning. We were merely answering each question with another, leading us onto parallel paths without any convergence. Despite recognizing this, I returned a question answering a question.

"Are you going to eat at home?"
"Yes. Also, I've already arrived."
"Eh?"

Abruptly, the call ended, and I heard the sound of the front door opening. Miyagi appeared soon after.

"I'm home."
"Welcome back."

Calling to Miyagi, who had returned sooner than anticipated, she briskly walked over to me.

"… Sendai-san, you're in my seat."
"Oh, sorry."

Attempting to stand with my smartphone in hand, Miyagi stepped on my foot, preventing me from getting up. Though the pressure wasn't enough to fracture bones, her irate expression betrayed a noticeable force pressing my foot into the floor.

"Miyagi, could you move your foot?"
"What's for dinner?"

Miyagi asked, her foot still planted on mine.

"I was thinking about making something. Is omelet rice okay?"
"… It’s not hamburg steak?"
"Did you want hamburg steak?"
"Omelet rice is fine. Lately, I think I’ve had too much hamburg steak anyway."

With a face expressing neither disappointment nor joy, Miyagi released my foot and settled into the chair opposite me that I usually occupy.

"Sendai-san, you're not particularly fond of hamburg steak, are you? Why were you making so much of it recently?"

Because it's important to Miyagi.

That important thing was something I had once been asked to make, tying into my own memories as well. However, any reason I articulate about liking what Miyagi likes tends to sour her mood.

The reason for making hamburg steak probably stems from something similar. If I didn’t want to further darken her mood, I shouldn't mention it. Nonetheless, that means I need to come up with a different reason.

"If I suddenly get a craving and have to go out to buy the ingredients, it's a hassle. So, I thought maybe if I kept making hamburg steak frequently, you'd stop suddenly asking for it."

It's not the best reason, but I can't think of anything more suitable. I anticipate she might have something to say. However, Miyagi doesn't delve further into why I've been making hamburg steak so often, and instead, she quietly mutters.

"It makes you gain weight. Actually, I've gained weight. Too much hamburg steak."

"Shall we exercise together, then?"

"Do you exercise, Sendai-san?"

"I do. Because, you know, gaining weight."

"Sendai-san gains weight, too?"

There's a note of surprise in Miyagi's voice.

"Of course. What did you think I was?"

"I thought you naturally just stayed that way without doing anything."

"It's not like I do nothing. I do at least walk a train station's distance."

I can't quite grasp what Miyagi means by "that way," but it's not as if I don't gain any excess weight.

"I see."

Miyagi's response is perfunctory, and the conversation is momentarily paused. Despite having asked, "Shall we exercise together?" Miyagi doesn't respond. Nor does she urge me to hurry up and make dinner, or suggest we cook together. A silence settles between us.

Though it's not an uncomfortable silence, Miyagi's gaze fixed on me prompts me to call out, "Miyagi."

"What?"

I hadn't formulated anything particular to say; I simply wanted to call out her name. Unsure of what to say, "Mio, you know-" escapes my lips unbidden.

"I don't want to hear about that."

Miyagi's voice is utterly devoid of warmth.

"Why not?"

"Because, you'll just say something like 'Mio wants to visit during the holidays,' right?"

"Close, but no. She suggested we hang out together outside during the holidays."

Having let Mio’s name slip, I relay what she had asked me to mention earlier today.

"I want to do that even less. You can go by yourself, Sendai-san."

I expected her to say that.
Even so, I find comfort in the predictability of her response.
But for her next words, I hope for something unexpected.

"I'm not going either. How about we spend the break just the two of us, somewhere special?"

No Mio, no Utsunomiya.
Just me and Miyagi.
That's what I want.

I gaze at Miyagi, who is seated in my usual chair, on the opposite side of the table.

Where Miyagi Is (III)

Part 286

"Where are you planning to go?"

Miyagi utters in a low voice, looking rather bored.

The "where are you planning to go" didn’t seem necessary.

Even so, it was a better response than being told "not going," so I flashed a smile and asked her a question.

"Anywhere is fine. Is there anywhere you'd like to go, Miyagi?"

During the break, I'll be staying home with Miyagi the whole time.

Even if she has plans with Utsunomiya, I'd want her to cancel them, so we can stay here together. But if Miyagi is okay with it, I’d also like to go out together.

I’m constantly torn between conflicting desires, and these feelings fluctuate wildly. But no matter which side my feelings lean towards, I already know what the outcome will be.

In any case, she never actually goes anywhere.

Even if we stay at home, I can't imagine her honestly just spending time with me.

Miyagi is always complicated.

That’s why I have to confirm things one by one.

“I don’t have anywhere I want to go, so I don’t need to go anywhere over the holidays.”

Miyagi, having raised my hopes ever so slightly, drops words I didn't want to hear and lightly kicks the floor.

“In that case, let’s take a morning walk together.”

Going somewhere.

The destination doesn't matter. If the goal is to "do something together with Miyagi during the 'Golden Week' holiday," even just strolling around the neighborhood is fine.

"Does that mean you want to go for a walk?"

"Yeah. Let's wake up a bit early."

"I don't want to get up early on a day off, and a walk sounds like a hassle."

"You've gained weight, right? Let's exercise every morning."

"Absolutely not."

Miyagi decisively refuses, and as she attempts to stand up, I propose another idea before she can flee the shared space.

"Then, how about a trip?"

"Going from a walk to a trip, that's a weird jump."

"It's not weird. Let's go to a hot spring."

"Didn't I say I wouldn't go to a hot spring?"

Apparently, Miyagi remembers the things I've said in the past.

Last year, during summer vacation, I suggested a hot spring trip to Miyagi.

I'm happy that she's interested enough in me to remember such trivial events, but I'm not thrilled that she's refusing the trip.

"Basically, Sendai-san, you want to save money, right? Enough that you work even during Golden Week."

Again, Miyagi brings up things that delight me while also uttering unwelcome words.

Wanting to save money.

That is also something I'd said in the past. While I'm glad it's remembered by Miyagi, I don't want it to be a reason to decline going out.

"What if we use our savings?"

I know that this isn't the best suggestion.

The money that had gradually accumulated between Miyagi and me during our high school days was once used to rent this room. Since getting it back, its purpose remains undefined. Though I've kept it as money for both of us to use, I'm unsure what it should be spent on. While we have used it for small purchases together, we haven't made any big expenditures.

Going on a trip would mean using a big portion of our shared money. Though it makes me hesitate, I also feel there's hardly another time to use it.

"We shouldn't use it."

Miyagi decisively cuts through my hesitation.

"Why?"

"…Because I think Sendai-san should use that money instead."

"Why?"

Mindlessly repeating the same question, Miyagi gazes intently at me.

"If you save it together with your part-time earnings, won't Sendai-san be able to continue living here indefinitely?"

Miyagi's unusually serious voice resonates in my ears.

If it were the usual Miyagi, she might tell me to save the money and quit working, yet she says nothing more, and just continues to quietly watch me.

"…Does this mean you would live together with me?"

Using our shared money.

If it helps continue this life together with Miyagi, then I think it's worth it.

"I never said that."

An unwavering reply comes back.

Miyagi inevitably refuses to act in the way I wish.

"Then let's keep our savings the way they are for now."

"You should use it, for your savings."

"There's no need to decide that right now. What matters now are the holiday plans."

While keeping everything undecided isn't great, I feel like having answers for everything isn't optimal either. Miyagi and I are in a nebulous state, feigning solidity with the term 'roommate.'

A relationship that hasn't crystallized seems fragile, so issues that could impact our future together are best left ambiguously.

"If both walks and trips aren't an option, where would you go with me, Miyagi?"

I ask, bringing the conversation back on track.

"There's nowhere, so we don't need to go anywhere."

A curt reply returns.

"If you aren't going anywhere, what do you plan to do during the holidays, Miyagi?"

"I'll be at home. Maika and Asakura-san have work."

"It's the opposite of last year. Last year, I stayed at home because you made it impossible for me to go outside."

"I won't do anything to keep you home this year, so you can go out with Mio-san."

Miyagi suggests something unpleasant.

It's inconvenient if she keeps me home since I have work, but at the same time, part of me wants her to. Yet, hearing her not do that is boring, and I don't appreciate her saying to go out with Mio.

My holidays are for Miyagi.

While working is important and necessary, it also links back to Miyagi. Obtaining a place away from my family's house means fostering potential to stay with Miyagi.

"I told you earlier I want to go out with you, Miyagi, not Mio. If going out is not your thing, let's do something together at home like last year."

"I don't want to do anything."

It can't be helped, I guess.

It was a miracle that she didn't reject my holiday outing proposal with an immediate "no" or "not going," like she usually does. So even though it's a boring answer, it was expected, and continuing the conversation won't change the result.

"Then it's fine if we don't go out or do anything during the holidays, but I'd like to kiss you right now."

I said, standing up to move closer to Miyagi.

"That has nothing to do with the holidays."

Sitting in my chair, she was displeased, her bad mood evident as she tried to kick me.

This happened recently.

It was the day I licked her feet in this very spot, and she had been in a similarly bad mood then. But she doesn't seem as upset now as she did that day.

"Even if it doesn't, it's fine. If nothing happens, then let's seal it with a kiss."

I grip Miyagi's cheek, placing my palm flat against it, drawing nearer, only to be pushed back by her hand on my stomach.

"…I wouldn't mind seeing penguins."

Without meeting my gaze, Miyagi mumbles softly.

That implicitly suggests a visit to an aquarium or zoo is acceptable, and I touch the plumeria earrings I'd given her.

"A date reservation, huh?"

I tried to say it as nonchalantly as possible, kissing Miyagi lightly on the ear. There are many things that remain unfulfilled between us, but I figured something like this would be permissible. Yet, Miyagi made a blatantly displeased face.

"I don't like that kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?"

"Calling a normal promise a date. It's what people in relationships say."

"It's not like only lovers are allowed to use 'date.' Friends use it too, right? Even Utsunomiya would say something like that, don't you think?"

"…She does, but…"

With a dissatisfied expression, she murmured that, then pressed her foot into mine, grinding it hard, glaring at me.

"Well, then it's fine."

I pulled my foot out from under hers and smiled.

"It's not fine."

"In that case, Miyagi, why don't you come up with a term other than 'date'?"

"There's no need."

“Fine, it doesn’t have to be a ‘date,’ but what about the penguins?”

Upon hearing my words, Miyagi furrowed her brow. She tugged at my clothes, saying, “Come a little closer,” and when I leaned in for a kiss, she firmly denied me with a “No.”

“Sendai-san, didn’t you say you’d give this to me?”

She tugged at my earlobe along with the blue stone.

“I did. It’s yours, Miyagi.”

I had given her my ears for her birthday. So, Miyagi is free to do as she pleases with it.

“I’m making a promise with what's mine, so don’t give it strange names.”

Before I could respond, her lips gently touched my ear.

The closeness of Miyagi made not just the touched part, but also my cheek and neck, tingle. Her body heat was so close that everything she touched felt warm.

Holding onto her shoulder, her lips parted but soon returned, sinking her teeth into my earlobe.

Firmly enough.

Enough to engrave our promise, and as I called out her name, she bit down harder. Swallowing the words that indicated pain, I tightened my grip on her shoulder, sliding my hand, seeking the soft part beyond the hardness of the bone, until she finally released my ear.

“It’s just a promise to see the penguins, but breaking it is not an option.”

She whispered in my ear. In place of a response, I pulled her closer, and her lips touched my ear once more.

Chapter 99

The Place Where Sendai-san Resides (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 287

Denying something is simple. Just say words like "no" or "I can't," and that's often enough.

The world is full of such simple acts.

Like saying hello, playing rock-paper-scissors, or even knocking on a door. These are all things one can easily do. Yet today, such simple actions feel inexplicably difficult, and I find myself unable to knock on Sendai-san's door.

In the eerily quiet morning, so silent one could almost hear the sound of a pin drop, I sigh inwardly.

I happened to wake up early. It was the beginning of Golden Week, a day that promised good weather and seemed perfect for a walk to shed some extra weight. That's all there was to it.

So, there's no need to knock on Sendai-san's door.

She’s likely still asleep, and it would be a pity to cut into her sleep time since she's working even during Golden Week. Moreover, a walk doesn't warrant waking up someone who's sleeping just to take part together.

If it's something I can do alone, I should do it alone.

Returning to my room, I slip a 500-yen coin into my denim pocket just in case, grab my smartphone, and adjust the position of the black cat guarding my bookshelf so it faces straight ahead.

As I step into the shared space, my eyes inadvertently land on the neighboring door. I quietly approach and press my ear against it.

—Nothing.

It seems she’s not awake at six in the morning during the break.

Leaving the shared space behind, I put on sneakers at the entrance and step outside. Although I'm wearing a hoodie, the early morning chill bites my skin.

Tempted to turn back to my room, I instead take a step forward. One step, two steps, and I continue walking down the stairs and along the sidewalk. Occasionally, I pass by other people.

People out for walks, or jogging.

Whether it's enjoyable or not, they all seem energetic. I'm neither walking nor jogging, but with each step I take, my body warms up.

I pass by both small and large dogs.

However, the dogs out for walks are the usual breeds like Shiba Inus or Labradors, and there's no Borzoi in sight. Naturally, neither is there the calico cat that Sendai-san often spots. Only the gentle morning sun shines down on me.

It’s a pleasant morning, I would say.

Normally bustling with cars, the streets are mostly empty, and the slightly chilly breeze caressing my cheeks feels nice. The bright world created by the sun brightens my spirits. But, if I had to choose between interesting or uninteresting, I'd choose the latter.

Being alone is dull.
—But what if it were the two of us?

I don't know.
Mechanically, I move my legs.

Though my body's moving forward, it's at such a slow pace that the fat doesn't seem inclined to burn off. At this leisurely pace, I don't get tired, but it leaves me wondering what the point of this walk is. I'm almost tempted to use the 500-yen coin in my pocket to buy a pudding and head back.

It's surely the hamburg steaks that are to blame.

Sendai-san has been cooking hamburg steak so much that they've cast a spell of fat on me. While her care for me is endearing, it also leaves me anxious. She constantly prioritizes me, focusing only on what matters to me, which leaves me wondering what's on her mind —much like the unyielding fat that sticks around.

I let out a deep breath and take a large step forward.
But my pace doesn't speed up.
A person walking from behind overtakes me.

The pace of my forward motion slows down.
Soon, a brown dog ambles ahead, with its owner following behind.
People and dogs alike pass me by, as though I'm the only one not moving forward.

"Maybe I should just go back."

Murmuring under my breath, I turn around.
I glance around, but the calico cat is nowhere to be found.
I figure it's a bad cat, showing itself only to Sendai-san.
Reanimating my stopped legs, I stretch them forward.

Why does it always end up like this?

Even when I'm away from Sendai-san, I can't stop thinking about her. For instance, I find myself thinking about how the house I'm returning to is an important place to Sendai-san.

It's surprising that Sendai-san, who doesn't seem to have any likes or dislikes, has a place that's important to her. But since she works part-time because she doesn't want to go home to her parents, it's not surprising that she would cherish a place that lets her avoid going home.

There's one thing I find puzzling, though.

To continue living in that important house, she could have used the 5,000 yen I, as a high schooler, gave her in exchange for orders. Yet she doesn't. It's a way to protect something important to her so I wonder what goes on in her head.

Even after graduating university, it's possible to keep what she holds dear.

"Idiot."

I murmur quietly and kick the pavement.
Even if I do this solo walk she suggested, I won't find answers to what I don't understand. Hence, it's no wonder I can't fathom why she suddenly referred to a simple outing as a "date."

Up to this point, she wasn't someone who would say such things to me.
Yet suddenly, she tosses around the word "date" — how could I possibly understand her?

If only Sendai-san were a dog.

If her tail was wagging, it would mean she's happy.
If her tail was hidden, it would mean she's frightened.

If it were that clear, I wouldn't have to walk alone. But if she were a dog, we couldn't live together in that house, and I'd still be alone in an empty home, just like when I was in high school.

"Idiot."

Saying it to no one in particular, I quicken my pace, heading home faster than I walked here. Before I can make it back, the phone held in my hand starts buzzing.

"Miyagi, where are you?"

Answering the call, I hear Sendai-san's irritated voice.

"Outside."
"I meant, where outside are you?"
"Around the neighborhood. Looking for a cat."

It's an obvious lie, but I don't want to admit I was just out for a walk, so I throw out a plausible excuse.

"A cat?"

Her dubious voice echoes in my ear.

"The calico cat you like."

"Did you find it?"
"Not, I didn't."
"The calico cat is Mike-chan, right? If you're out for a walk, wait there. I'll change quickly and join you."

Ignoring my denial, Sendai-san hurriedly insists. At this rate, she sounds ready to hurl herself outside in five seconds flat, so I quickly respond to stop her.

"I didn't find it, and I'm heading back with pudding instead."
"Pudding?"
"For the calories burned. Do you want some pudding, too?"
"I'd like one, but aren't you going for a walk?"
"I'm tired, going back to eat breakfast."

Sendai-san is mine, but she's not my pet.

So, unlike the people I passed by, I won't be taking a walk with her. It's better to head back and have breakfast together sooner. Besides, I already declined her offer for a walk.

Golden Week has only just begun.

There are days Sendai-san is absent because of her part-time job, but since that house is something important to her, she'll always return if I wait. Plus, we have plans to go see the penguins, so I won't be alone on that day.

"Alright, I'll prepare breakfast, so come back quickly," she says, her voice coming through the phone—slightly displeased, but still gentle.

"I'll come back soon, you don't have to tell me," I reply.

"And don't forget the pudding."

I respond with a "Got it" and end the call. There's a single 500-yen coin in my pocket. Thinking about which pudding to buy, I head towards the convenience store.

The Place Where Sendai-san Resides (II)

Part 288

After breakfast, naturally, we also had the pudding I'd bought.

As I tried to return to my room, Sendai-san followed me.

I had nothing particularly special planned for the holidays, nor did I have anything I had to do. Maika was going to work, and Asakura-san was also working.

Since I didn't plan anything with the busy pair, it wasn't a problem for Sendai-san to come to my room. However, I couldn't help but notice she didn't seem pleased while trailing behind me.

"Aren't you going back to your own room?"

I asked, looking back as I opened the door to the room.

"I'm not going, but do you want me to go, Miyagi?"
"...That's not what I meant."
"Then, come in."

With a casual command as if it were her own room, Sendai-san nudged me inside.

"That's supposed to be my line."

I entered the room, saying so, and Sendai-san followed me and closed the door. When I sat down against the back of the bed, she naturally sat down next to me.

Sitting side by side was a usual occurrence, nothing to be concerned about. But I was concerned. Perhaps it was because the space between us felt wider than usual.

The distance between us was about the width of two crocodile tissue covers.
Further than usual.

Sendai-san wasn't looking at me.
She wasn't fetching a book from the shelf.
She was just staring intently at her phone that she'd brought with her.

She hadn't been in a good mood since breakfast.
Even pudding couldn’t fix her mood.

The reason was likely that I left without a word this morning. But I found that rather childish.

There's no rule against leaving the house alone in the morning.
Sendai-san was still asleep, and there was no need to wake her.
So, I wasn't in the wrong.

—Though I did feel a bit guilty.

I placed the crocodile between us to fill the gap.
But it didn’t entirely fill it.
There remained a gap about the size of a single crocodile cover.

With a soft thump, I tapped the crocodile's head and spoke to Sendai-san, who still hadn't looked up from her phone.

"What are you looking at?"
"Nothing in particular."

Sendai-san replied in a flat voice and put her phone on the table.

"If it's nothing, why don't you read a manga?"
"There's nothing I want to read."
"A game?"
"Don't feel like it."

With an indifferent voice, Sendai-san grasped the crocodile's hand.

This side of her was unusual.

Unlike her high school years, as a university student, it was rare for Sendai-san to be so openly in a bad mood.

"...So, why are you here?"

When I stared intently at Sendai-san, who refused to look at me, she

spoke to the crocodile she was holding.

"I'm here to make sure Miyagi doesn't go anywhere."
"I don't have anywhere to go. I wasn't planning to leave."
"Yet you went for a morning stroll, leaving me behind."

A voice filled with accusation reached my ears.

"...I know that was bad, but you were asleep, Sendai-san."

Despite it being an excuse, I appended a "sorry," and only then did Sendai-san, who had been talking to the crocodile, look at me.

"You should've woken me up to invite me. Anyway, say something if you're going out. I worry, you know."
"I was just killing some time, I planned to be right back. Nothing to worry about."
"But I did worry. —You've disappeared before, Miyagi."

I immediately understood what Sendai-san was referring to.

Last year, without telling her, I went to Maika's house and stayed the night without returning.

I knew it was wrong to stay at Maika's until Sendai-san came to fetch me, but I didn't want to discuss that now. So, I said nothing.

As a result, the atmosphere in the room became tense and awkward. And I wasn't good at changing such atmospheres.

If I could, I'd leave the room, but fleeing my own room meant I had nowhere to go. I could go to the shared space, but even if I did, Sendai-san would soon fetch me back, making escape meaningless.

"Miyagi, say something."
"...Something."

I muttered, and the crocodile came flying at me, hitting my arm and falling to the floor.

"When I said to say something, I didn’t mean that."

With a big sigh, Sendai-san continued.

"If you're going for a walk tomorrow, I'm coming with you. Wake me up if I'm asleep. You have to."
"Got it. ...But I won't be going again."

Avoiding things I wasn't used to was probably for the best.
If this was how it was going to be, I'd be better off spending my time like last year.

Even if Maika was busy with work, she'd surely have a little time, so I could invite her. If she didn't, I could go to her workplace instead.

"Miyagi, you're stingy."
"I'm not stingy."
"Yes, you are."

Sendai-san murmured and hugged the crocodile that had fallen to the floor again.

Truly, today's Sendai-san was unusual.
She normally didn't do such things.
Maybe that's why, but today she seemed more cute than pretty.

More than usual.
Somehow, she looked cute.

The casual cut-and-sew top and skirt she wore for loungewear didn't stand out, but somehow she looked cuter than usual. It was strange, but perhaps it had its reasons.

"...Don't you need to study? Or prepare for your part-time job?"

Fearing the conversation would die out further, I asked something I wasn't particularly interested in.

"I have time for that set aside."
"So, it's not that time, yet?"

I averted my gaze towards the floor.

"This is Miyagi's room time."
"I see."

When I gave a small reply, she held my hand.
Drawn to our connected hands, I looked at Sendai-san, who had

recently averted her gaze from me. The crocodile had disappeared at some point, replaced by Sendai-san, now closer.

As I focused on our warm hands, the color of her nails, chosen by me before the Golden Week, caught my eye.

"...They suit you."

I finally expressed the words I'd yet to say since the nail polish had been applied.

"What does?"
"Your nails."
"Thanks. Want me to paint yours?"
"I'm fine without it."
"Okay."

Her voice sounded a little disappointed, and she gave my hand a firm squeeze.
Like last year, Sendai-san sat beside me and held my hand.

But that was in Sendai-san's room, not mine, so while it seemed the same, it was different. And last year, I didn't go for a walk in the morning, and Sendai-san wasn't wearing the color I had chosen on her nails.

Living through similar days can make you forget, but last year and this year are never the same.
Yesterday is different from today, and today will differ from tomorrow.
Each day has its own uniqueness, shaping this year apart from last.
And next year will differ from this one.

I pulled on her hand.
Gazing at the nails clad in the color I chose.

"Miyagi?"

Sendai-san called out to me.
So, I brushed my lips softly against hers.
Just for a moment.
A touch, and then withdrew.

"...Are you trying to appease me?"

Sendai-san asked, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

"It's not like that."
"Then what is it?"
"I don't know."

If I understood why things ended up this way, it wouldn't be so challenging. The feelings directed toward Sendai-san were always too complex.

Trying to make sense of it all seemed futile, but the relationship of being roommates wasn't pointless. I thought it would be nice if Sendai-san could stay beside me for much longer.
Even though no two days are exactly the same, I couldn't help but wish for it.

"Miyagi, you really are hard to understand."

Sendai-san said in exasperation, gently stroking my earring and tugging at my ear.

"It's fine not to understand."

There's no need for complications.
It's just right if we remain a bit of a mystery to each other.
I touched Sendai-san's lips with mine once more.

Chapter 100

Today, Miyagi Is Next to Me (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 289

I spent a few days of the holiday in a way that might not seem significant—watching movies and reading manga with Miyagi in my room—but it meant a lot to me.

And now, today.
Sitting across from me is not Miyagi, but Hanamaki Kikyo-chan.

I had no intention of skipping my part-time job, nor did I have any complaints about it. I find teaching enjoyable and well-suited to me. However, there's a part of me that wishes to return home.

Because Miyagi had been acting in a way to appease me.

Though I sense it's probably not the case, and I know Miyagi wouldn't do something like that for my sake. But the things she did made me yearn to return to the mundane daily life with her, even while at work.

I value my students and know better than to treat them carelessly, yet part of me wants to drop everything and be by Miyagi's side.

—This isn't good.

I press my nails, painted in a color Miyagi said suited me, and look at Kikyo-chan. She's a diligent student, dutifully completing everything I ask of her.

She never neglects her homework, nor does she try to slack off during our lessons. Even during this holiday break, she's sitting attentively before me.

This was not the case when I tutored Miyagi.

Well, Miyagi is unlike anyone else, anyway.

I respond to several questions Kikyo-chan poses, and assign new problems. The days of Golden Week pass just as any other, and, before I realize it, our allotted time draws to a close.

"Time's nearly up. Do you have any questions?" I ask Kikyo-chan, who's scribbling in her notebook. After some thought, she speaks.

"Do you have any plans during the holiday, Sensei?"
"Plans... you mean with my students?" I smile, replying regarding further "tutoring plans."

"Other than that."
"Other than tutoring, I'll just be at home, no specific plans."

While I do have plans to see penguins, it's not something I'd share with a student.

"Don't you go out with your roommate, Miyagi-san?" Kikyo-chan sets her pen down, watching me intently. Ever since meeting Miyagi, she's begun mentioning the term "roommate" frequently. Maybe even before they met.

"No plans for that, really," I say, smiling and lying.

It pains me, but telling the truth seems like it might lead to a troublesome result.

"That's a shame, especially with the holiday. Are you two fighting?"
"No, no, we're getting along fine."
"Miyagi-san said she’s not one for part-time jobs, but could she be busy with one now?"
"Something like that, perhaps."

While it feels wrong to enshroud things concerning Miyagi with lies, I figure it's better than revealing the truth. It’s an approach I’ve always used and am familiar with, but I haven’t been resorting to it much lately, leading to a twinge of guilt.

"University life seems tough," Kikyo-chan observes earnestly.

"It has its challenges."
"If I had a roommate, I'd like to spend holidays having fun with

them."
"In that case, I hope you find such a roommate."

Whether she truly yearns for a roommate or has some other reason, I can only offer harmless responses.

"Indeed."

Kikyo-chan's agreement is uncertain, and she adds, "Sensei, it's time." Checking the clock, I see our scheduled time has indeed elapsed.

"Then that's it for today."
"Yes."

Hearing Kikyo-chan's reply, I start to tidy up the reference books and pencil cases from the table. As I shoulder my bag to leave the room, she accompanies me to the entrance, as usual.

"See you later."

At my words, Kikyo-chan bows slightly in gratitude.

As soon as I'm out the door, thoughts of Miyagi fill my mind.

I want to get home quickly.

My stride naturally quickens, reflecting my eagerness. The scenery rushes past faster than it did when I first came. I briskly navigate the nighttime streets to catch the train, thinking of how, today, Miyagi is home.

She mentioned everyone else is working part-time, so she'd stay home during the holidays. Hence, she'll be home tomorrow and the day after, too.

In my high school days, my haven was Miyagi's room. Now, the home we share is my refuge and Miyagi's as well.

Though I don't believe in eternity, I wish I could endlessly remain in that house as Miyagi's roommate for as long as I'm a university student.

Continuing to work part-time, commuting by train, and returning to

the home where Miyagi awaits.

These are the days I wish to repeat over and over. As I try to keep thoughts of the inevitable reality at bay, the station where I get off arrives, and I step onto the platform.

Exiting through the gate, I walk a path where I often meet Mike-chan. However, it tends not to appear at night, so I reach home without seeing it.

Upon unlocking the door and entering, I notice Miyagi's shoes are in their place. Heading into the shared space, I find her wrestling with a frying pan and call out.

"I'm home."
"Welcome back."

Without looking at me, Miyagi offers a greeting and asks, "Hungry?"

"I am... Is that mapo tofu?" I guess tonight's menu based on the aroma in the shared space.

"Probably."
"Probably?"

Hearing her uncertain tone, I draw closer to her. Glancing into the frying pan, I see something that resembles mapo tofu, though lacking any visible tofu.

"It all ends up the same once it's in your stomach," Miyagi excuses herself.

"It looks tasty. I'll just put my bag down, so wait for me."

Even if the tofu has lost its shape, it should still taste like mapo tofu. Besides, regardless of taste, I would never complain about something Miyagi cooked.

I return to my room and set my bag down.
In no time, I'm back in the shared space, helping with dinner preparations.
We arrange the meal of rice and mapo tofu on the table.

Spoons rest on the plates.

Chopsticks on the cat-shaped holders.
And Miyagi opposite of me.

Once everything's set, I join her in sitting.

"Let's eat."

In unison, we begin to eat the mapo tofu.

I want to sit next to her soon.

Thinking this, I take a bite of the mapo tofu, which looked like it was playing hide-and-seek.

Today, Miyagi Is Next to Me (II)

Part 290

"It's delicious."

I convey my thoughts to Miyagi as I swallow the tofu that nearly melts away in my mouth.

"Sendai-san, you always lie."

A disgruntled voice comes back, and I take another bite of the mapo tofu.

It's not spicy—just delicious.

I'm not someone who dislikes spicy food, but the slightly sweet mapo tofu Miyagi made is undeniably tasty. For me, the fact that Miyagi made it already gives it value, but even without that factor, I genuinely mean it.

"I only speak the truth. Don't you think it's delicious, Miyagi?"

"It's tasty, but..."

She murmurs hesitantly, lacking confidence, while nibbling on her portion of mapo tofu.

"Miyagi, you've gotten better at cooking."

"It's nothing—I just used the mapo tofu mix and added tofu."

Her low voice suggests dissatisfaction. For some reason, the more I praise her, the worse Miyagi's mood seems to get.

She's always so irrational.
But I'm glad she made dinner and waited for me, so I express my honest feelings.

"No matter what ingredients you use, if the end result is tasty, it means you've improved, right?"

"You could make it even tastier, Sendai-san."

"I don't think it'd be that different."

"It would."

"If it would, it's just because I've been cooking longer than you have, Miyagi."

"I don't think that's it."

"That's just how it is."

I continue to contradict Miyagi, who seems determined to negate everything I say, while reducing the amount of mapo tofu on my plate. Across from me, Miyagi munches away on her mapo tofu as well.

Surely, even she finds it delicious.

Though I've never made mapo tofu since coming to this house, I think I might try making it from now on.

"Do you prefer silken tofu, Miyagi?"

The tofu in this mapo tofu is soft and goes down smoothly, suggesting it's silken instead of the firmer momen tofu.

"I just used it because it was in the fridge."

"I see. Next time, if I make mapo tofu, which do you prefer, silken or momen?"

"This one. How about you, Sendai-san?"

"Silken, I guess."

Momen tofu might make for better-looking mapo tofu, but if I'm making it, it should be something Miyagi wants to eat. And whatever Miyagi wants to eat would become what I want to eat too.

Sweet.
Silken.

I'll remember Miyagi's preferred mapo tofu.

"Sendai-san."

As I'm slowly savoring the mapo tofu, Miyagi calls out to me.

"What is it?"

"Is there anything specific you want to eat?"

Miyagi asks before popping another bite of mapo tofu into her mouth.

"Well, let's see... What do you want to eat, Miyagi? Is it hamburg steak, again?"

I've been refraining from making hamburg steak lately because Miyagi mentioned gaining weight. But if she wants it, I'll make it anytime. I could cook it even before she asks, but Miyagi's weight is a concern.

Whether she's gained weight, lost it, or is exactly the same, it doesn't matter to me as long as she's healthy. Still, if Miyagi starts going out for walks on her own to lose weight, that would be a problem.

She never admitted it was a part of a diet plan, but those early morning walks surely were, and so I believe I should keep an eye on Miyagi's weight.

"I'll let you know if I want hamburg steak."

Miyagi mutters quietly.

"Anything else you'd like?"

"As long as it's not something I hate."

"You mean broccoli?"

"Things like shungiku or green peppers too. There are others."

"Isn't that quite a lot?"

"It isn't."

Miyagi responds definitively, taking large bites of mapo tofu.
I take another bite too.
As we chat idly over dinner, the plates empty quickly. Before I start cleaning up, I ask Miyagi, "What do you want to do afterward?"

"What about you, Sendai-san?"

"I'd like to watch a movie with you, Miyagi."

"...No horror."

From across the table, her voice is unmistakably unhappy.

—Perhaps she's still annoyed about that.

I know why Miyagi is saying this with such displeasure, even without asking.

After her solo walk, it wasn't exactly revenge, but I did show her a horror movie trailer unannounced. She's probably still holding that grudge.

"There's no need to be so cautious—I won't show you anything like that again."

The trailer wasn't terrifying on its own. It only had eerie music, and my intention was simply to surprise her a bit, thinking it might lead to us sleeping together after. Since it's Golden Week, I figured things like that might happen, but apparently, Miyagi doesn't think along those lines.

She took the penguin plush we share and retreated back to her room.

"So, let me know what you want to watch first."

Miyagi, who's not even trying to hide her bad mood, glares at me.

"Why don't you pick something you want to watch, Miyagi? That way, it won't be anything scary, right? And should we watch in my room or yours?"

"I haven’t even agreed to watch anything yet. Don't just decide on your own."

Miyagi gets up and begins cleaning up the dishes. I follow her lead, carrying some to the kitchen. As she grabs the sponge, I ask, "You’re not watching?"

"...I'm free anyway, so I'll watch in your room, Sendai-san."

She mumbles softly, and I grab the sponge from her.

"Okay, then I'll wash up quickly."

I'm faster at washing dishes than she is.

As I promised, I swiftly finish cleaning, prepare two glasses, and pour soda and barley tea. Miyagi picks up the glass with the clear soda, and I carry the remaining glass to the room.

Together, we place the glasses on the table with a clink. Miyagi sits, leaning against the bed. I bring over the tablet and sit next to her.

I pass the tablet to Miyagi, who selects a Japanese film from a few years ago and presses play. The screen displays an actor we haven't seen recently, and a movie adapted from a manga starts to play.

It feels like last year.
Back then, we spent Golden Week watching movies together too.
But this year is different from last year.

It has become normal for Miyagi to come to my room, and we've been watching movies since the start of Golden Week. That stability is comforting and something I wish would continue, but it also leaves a bit to be desired.

I hold Miyagi's hand.
She doesn't resist or pull away.

When I nudge her with my shoulder, she pushes back with mild irritation, but that's all. Nestling my shoulder and arm against her, she finally voices a complaint.

"Sendai-san, you're too close."

"That's fine."

"It's not fine."

Still, Miyagi doesn't let go of my hand.

I wish she'd initiate a kiss at times like this, but Miyagi never does. I know that any attempt to compel her would only end poorly.

Even if I try creating a moment where "Miyagi would want to kiss," she never begs for it. Rather, she would probably start refusing kisses from me altogether.

That's how Miyagi is, and I'm fine with that. But I still want kisses, and I don't want her to reject them.

"Miyagi."

There's no answer when I call her.
I lean on her, putting pressure on our joined shoulder and arm.
The fragrance of the same shampoo tickles my nose.

By using the same shampoo, I had wanted Miyagi to be more conscious of me. But most likely, I sense Miyagi far more often than she senses me.

I belong to Miyagi, though Miyagi doesn't belong to me. I have no complaints about that, but I do wish the space I occupy within Miyagi would grow.

"...Shall we kiss?"

Knowing she'll never say "yes," I don't wait for an answer and press a kiss to her cheek. But before I can feel her warmth, she pushes me away, breaking our contact before it fully forms.

"Stop with the weird stuff and watch the movie."

"You can watch the movie, Miyagi."

"When you do weird things, I can't watch."

"If it's just a kiss on the cheek, you can still watch, right?"

I caress her cheek and try kissing again.

"I can't watch."

"Then why don’t we watch the movie later?"

I tug on Miyagi's shirt, turning her towards me. I silence her lips before she can object, my tongue sneaking in, but Miyagi pushes against my shoulder before it can entwine with hers.

"We're watching it now, not later."

Her sulky voice is accompanied by her turning the tablet away from me.

"If you give me a kiss, we can keep watching."

Trivial tricks don't work on Miyagi.
But I know that making an exchange often works.
And I know Miyagi needs a reason.

I place the tablet back on the bed and pull her arm towards me. Strongly, determinedly. Then, I let my back rest against the floor.

"What's this?"

Miyagi's brow furrows as she finds herself hovering over me.

"Would you have preferred if I had pinned you down?"

"That's not it. If it's just a kiss, we don't need to do this."

"So, you're going to kiss me?"

"I didn't say that."

"Aren't you interested in watching the rest of the movie?"

I gently prompt, and her fingertips brush against my lips.

Chapter 101

Sendai-san Never Tells the Truth (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 291

I slowly traced my finger along Sendai-san's lips.

They're softer than the hand I was holding. Pressing lightly, her lips part.
As I pushed a finger ever so slightly inside, I felt a soft nibble.

She desired a kiss, and at this rate, we wouldn't continue watching the movie.

There was no reason to hesitate.

I pulled my finger back. Though I had no intention of pushing her down, looking into Sendai-san's eyes, I found myself doing just that. Her gaze was fixed directly on me.

I felt at ease, yet my heart raced. The day, the moment, the time—what I felt from her gaze varied.

Today, my heart was beating a bit faster. I didn't want to know the reason. Bringing my lips close, I questioned her before they touched.

"Sendai-san, you don't intend to watch the rest of the movie after kissing, do you?"

I know how she'll respond in times like these. There's a rhythm Sendai-san has decided on, and it's not allowed to change. Every conversation lands in a predetermined place.

"That's not true."
"It is. You always lie, Sendai-san."
"Why don't you test to see if I'm lying?"

Under me, Sendai-san smiled sweetly. That well-known smile I

could instantly see was contrived.

I didn’t like it.

Her words came precisely as I’d predicted, and what I’d do next was exactly as she expected. Knowing that, I didn’t bother to complain. Any effort to steer the conversation in a different direction would be futile. No matter how much I tried to veer off course, the outcome of a kiss would remain the same.

Whether she wanted one kiss or two, or more than that.

Without asking such things, I pressed my lips against Sendai-san’s. But as I pulled away almost immediately, as if dissatisfied with the less-than-a-second brush, Sendai-san tugged at my arm.

"Miyagi."

A slightly lower voice called my name. I had complied with the terms of the exchange, so my lips should have been unnecessary. Yet, Sendai-san's lips pressed against mine again, her arms wrapping around my back. As our bodies threatened to come together as our lips did, I grabbed her arm and pulled it away.

"You’re lying again. You just said you wouldn’t lie."

I brought up what she’d said when we ate mapo tofu together. After tasting the tofu I made, she’d said it was delicious. When I doubted her words, she replied, "I never lie."

Sendai-san was always like this. She constantly did things that made me doubt her.

"I wasn’t lying," Sendai-san said nonchalantly.

"Then watch the rest of the movie."
"I didn't get enough kisses."
"But you never specified how many kisses, Sendai-san."

Sendai-san hadn’t specified a number of kisses, and I hadn’t asked. Knowing this outcome, I accepted her suggested exchange.

Sendai-san ought to listen to me, and I didn’t want to comply with her.

And still, I sometimes moved as if I were her puppet.

As if I actually wanted to kiss Sendai-san over and over.

That wasn't my intention, yet that's how it might seem, so I lifted myself up and sat on the floor.

"...I don't need to watch the movie anymore."
"Are you saying you'd rather kiss more?"

Sendai-san spoke the answer she knew to be wrong.

"No, I'm going back to my room."

If I continued to follow her terms, kisses wouldn't be enough.

Probably, Sendai-san wanted more than just kisses, which is why she proposed such an absurd condition. And, given how things have been between us, I would accept what happens next.

"What about the movie?" Sendai-san asked softly as she sat up.

"....."

This is a short and lackluster break. My close friends are busy with part-time jobs, and I'm the only one with time on my hands. Since I'm not someone who prefers to be alone, there's a gap in my feelings where the thought that maybe it's okay to have something happen with Sendai-san slips in.

To have a time where I was the only one touching her, and she was the only one touching me.

Perhaps with that time, I wouldn't have to worry about what Sendai-san was doing at her part-time job.

—Is that really the case?

I stared intently at Sendai-san, who naturally settled beside me.

I accepted her tutoring job, yet along with the term "part-time," an image of students I had never known appeared.

It wasn’t amusing.
It was dull.
It was frustrating.

It was such an unpleasant feeling that none of those words quite captured it.
Even if Sendai-san belonged to me, it didn’t feel like enough.

"Miyagi," she called in a soft voice.

Yet, I couldn’t respond.

"Let’s just watch the rest of the movie, okay?"

As if nothing had happened moments before, the soft voice accompanied moving the tablet from the bed to the table.

"...No, I’m going back to my room."
"Don’t say that. Watch the rest. If not, we can choose a different movie."
"It’s not about that."
"Then what is it?"

Her hand reached out, tangling in my hair as if it were nothing. She gently tugged, but I grabbed her hand and pinned it to the floor.

"What? I’d rather touch you than the floor," she said, peeling her hand from the floor and attempting again to reach for my hair. I slapped her hand away.

"...Do you ever touch your students, Sendai-san?"

With a voice smaller than I expected, I asked, and a flat response returned.

"Do you think there’s any reason to touch students when teaching them?"

"I don’t know, but it’s possible."

When we were in high school, Sendai-san touched me when we studied.

And I touched her, too.

"There's no need to touch anyone to teach them."
"...What about from the student's side?"
"Are you referring to Kikyo-chan?"
"Or the other one."

"There's no reason for a tutor to be touched by a student..."

Her voice, unchanged from when she'd describe the evening menu, trailed off. As the words stopped, I felt uncomfortable and pulled the platypus tissue cover toward me, attempting to draw out a tissue. Sendai-san began to say, "About that," but I kicked her foot to stop her.

I didn't want to be told I was jealous.
This wasn't a feeling of jealousy.

I simply didn't want Sendai-san doing with others what she did with me.

It was just that—nothing more, nothing less. I stood up, grabbed the penguin from the bed, and placed it beside Sendai-san.

"This can be my substitute. If you have any urges, make do with the penguin."

Sendai-san's presence made me act strangely.
I said things I'd never tell Maika and thought things I'd never consider regarding Maika and the others.

I understood it was because I categorized Sendai-san differently from Maika and the others.

Maika and the others are friends.
Sendai-san is—

Just as I've tucked Maika and the others away under the label of 'friends,' I've stored Sendai-san under the label of 'roommate.' However, there are times when I don't want to read the words that categorize Sendai-san.

This isn't good.
The current distance between me and Sendai-san is too close.
Surely, we need at least the distance of one penguin between us.

"...So this is you, Miyagi. Well, it looks just like you—especially with the belly," Sendai-san says, holding the penguin and patting its stomach.

"My stomach doesn't stick out that much," I retort, stepping firmly on Sendai-san's foot before moving to sit a little further away from her.

"Really? Mind if I check?"

Without waiting for my response, she closes the gap and starts to touch my abdomen.

"Annoying," I say, slapping her hand away.

"It's fine, just a little," she insists.

"It's not fine. If you want to touch something, touch the penguin."

"So, does that mean I can do whatever I want to Pen-chan?"

"…And what are you planning to do?"

When I push on Sendai-san's shoulder and look at her, she gives me a suggestive smile.

"What do you want me to do?"

"That kind of question is sneaky. You're always like this, Sendai-san."

"I'm just thinking of doing whatever Miyagi wants me to do. Isn't Pen-chan your substitute?"

"Give it back, you're going to do something weird."

"I'm not going to do anything weird," she says with a cheerful smile, then kisses the penguin's beak, followed by its belly. When her lips touch the short legs, I snatch the penguin away.

"You did something weird anyway. You're such a pervert, Sendai-san."

Truly, she never does anything decent. I place the penguin back on the bed and glare at Sendai-san.

"I don’t think that’s enough to call me a pervert."

"You're definitely a pervert."

"Miyagi, what about your promise to go see the penguins with this pervert? We still haven’t decided where to go, but are you thinking of not going?"

Without reaching out or closing the distance, Sendai-san wraps her arms around her knees.

"I'll go," I reply quietly.

"Where to?"

"I’ll decide."

"Miyagi will?" she asks, sounding surprised, while looking at me.

"Yes. So stop complaining, Sendai-san. Also, I'm going to watch this movie, so be quiet."

After giving a firm reminder to Sendai-san, who only ever does unnecessary things, I pressed play on the tablet.

Sendai-san Never Tells the Truth (II)

Part 292

The proximity of being next to each other—whether it's close or far—I can't tell.

But in this confined space, a room that's not too big, it feels natural that Sendai-san is close enough that our shoulders might touch.

Since then, the tablet remained in front of us, finishing a film we weren't sure we wanted to watch.

I sighed, releasing a "haa," and splashed at the water's surface.

Splash.

The sound reverberated through the bathroom, wetting my face. I closed my eyes and shook my head, then murmured softly, "This is frustrating."

After watching the movie to the end credits, we decided who would take a bath first with a game of rock-paper-scissors. I won, and so it’s me, on the verge of drowning in the bathtub. Sendai-san is still in her room.

Opening my eyes, I looked at the blue-tinted water dyed by the bath salts.

After pressing play on the movie interrupted by our kiss, Sendai-san's composure held fast, and didn't vanish away into nothingness—nothing happened between us. That meant we could watch the movie till the end peacefully and uneventfully, which I shouldn't feel dissatisfied about.

I never intended to do anything more than watch the movie with Sendai-san, nor did I wish for something to be done to me, so I should have no complaints, yet it feels dull.

"It's because the movie was uninteresting."

Lacking enough interest to keep watching the screen, my attention drifted to Sendai-san beside me.

Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if Sendai-san did what she did to the penguin to me, or if I did the same to her.

Such thoughts floated up from somewhere within me, only to fade away, repeating over and over. Even now, I find myself wondering what would have happened if I had followed Sendai-san's lead then.

A foggy uncertainty lingers within me, refusing to lift even in a bathroom without Sendai-san. Instead, it morphs into something heavier than the water, and denser than the blue surface, gravitating towards the "Sendai-san" in me. This formless desire threatens to solidify, prompting me to smack my cheeks lightly.

What would Sendai-san do in this situation?

That thought drifts into my mind, only to be hurriedly dismissed. This is not something worth pondering.

After all, Sendai-san does it by—

I forcefully erase the memory of the secret she once confided to me in the past.

"Seriously, this is annoying."

What I should be thinking about now isn't Sendai-san, but the place where the "penguins" we planned to see together over the break are located. Since I insisted I would decide, I need to choose our "destination" before the break ends.

The aquarium we visited together.
The zoo we visited together.

Both places had penguins, so either would suffice. But penguins aren't exactly uncommon, so they can be found in many places if you look for them. So, another location could work too. If I'm undecided, we could even let a game of chance choose, or simply pick the closest place.

For Sendai-san, penguins arguably don't matter much; seeing them here or there doesn't make much of a difference.

I suspect Sendai-san doesn’t particularly like penguins.

It's not just penguins. Animals, and even things that aren't animals, seem equally indifferent to her. Simultaneously, nothing seems to make it onto her list of dislikes either. It might just mean that it's all inconsequential to her.

Sendai-san's notion of "likes" and "dislikes" is like a fluffy cloud, prone to changing shape and vanishing easily, I think.

Being with such a Sendai-san sometimes makes me feel like I might just be one of those things she doesn’t particularly like but doesn’t dislike either.

At those times, Sendai-san, looking at me, touching me as if it were the most natural thing, feels like a mistake—like she’s mistakenly focusing on me.

It's not an issue for a tutor's student to be like that, but it's not amusing for me to become one of those things.

"It's all Sendai-san’s fault."

I slap the blue surface of the water.

Right now, Sendai-san's feelings don’t matter.

I want to see the penguins during the break, and if we're going to see them, it's better to research before going.

After leaving the bathroom, I change into sweats and head to the shared space. I set a glass on the table, pour orange juice from the refrigerator, and take a sip while eyeing Sendai-san’s room. The door remains closed. I take another sip and exhale.

Having no reason to stay here, I’m about to return to my room with the glass when Sendai-san appears in the shared space, the door opening where it hadn’t before.

“Just got out of the bath?”

She asks softly.

“You can tell just by looking.”
“I can, but I wanted to confirm.”

Saying so, Sendai-san steps closer and lightly tugs at my hair.

“Miyagi, your hair’s still damp. Did you dry it properly?”
“It's mostly dried.”

Although it might fall short of what Sendai-san means by "properly," I did towel off after the bath. It may be wetter compared to usual, but since I did dry it a bit, there should be no issue.

“What do you mean by mostly? You need to dry it properly, or you’ll catch a cold.”

She sounds like a fussy parent from a drama or manga.

“It’d be Sendai-san catching the cold. I won’t catch one.”

Before coming to this house and even since moving in, only Sendai-san caught colds. Even if I haven’t felt well on occasion, I have never been bedridden.

“That might be true, but you might catch one too. I'll get the hairdryer, so wait here.”
“No need to go get the hairdryer.”
“Then I’ll dry your hair with a towel.”
“I don’t need a towel.”
“Don’t hold back. Just wait.”

Ignoring my words, Sendai-san disappears momentarily, only to return swiftly with a towel.

“Miyagi, sit here.”

She pulls out the chair, her smile warm and inviting.

“Why?”

I ask, looking straight at her.

“To make it easier to dry your hair.”
“I can dry my own hair.”

I avert my gaze from Sendai-san.

I don’t want to be touched by her now.

The uncertainty I felt in the bathroom hasn’t gone away.

I tried filling my head with thoughts of locations where penguins are, but it hasn’t worked too well. If she touches me now, the uneasiness might swell, squashing the thought of the penguins completely.

“Do you not want me to dry your hair that much?”

I can’t answer her question.

I take a gulp of orange juice and offer it to Sendai-san.

“You can have the rest, so give me the towel.”

Sendai-san says nothing.

The silence lingers too long, prompting me to glance at her, and she places a towel on my head, saying, "Here you go." Taking the towel and spreading it open, I catch a nice scent and turn my back to Sendai-san. While briskly drying my hair with the given towel, I mutter softly, "Tomorrow, okay."

"What do you mean by tomorrow?"

"The day we're going to see the penguins."

"Isn't that a bit sudden?"

"If you don't want to go, that's fine too."

"I didn't say I didn't want to go. So have you decided where we're going?"

Turning to face her after she nudged my back, I noticed the glass of orange juice was empty.

"... I'll let you know tomorrow. We'll head out after an early lunch, so make sure to wake up properly."

I don't want to admit that I haven't decided on a destination yet. Nor do I want to say I'll research it now.

If I tell Sendai-san, she'd probably be annoyingly picky. And if she suggests deciding together and follows me to my room, it will just be troublesome. With her beside me, I doubt I could concentrate on the research.

I hate the feeling that the destination of this vague unease would be decided before I decide where to go tomorrow.

"You better wake up on time too, Miyagi. No canceling last minute because you overslept."

"I won't oversleep."

"Alright then."

With that, Sendai-san handed me her empty glass and added, "I'll leave the washing to you."

Sendai-san Never Tells the Truth (III)

Part 293

Upon opening my eyes, I found a black cat nestled next to me, clutching a smartphone in its paws.

—Well, more accurately, the black cat and the smartphone were sprawled beside me.

The smartphone wasn't acting as an alarm. I didn't wake up due to anything in particular; it was simply a natural awakening.

"…What time is it?"

Mumbling an inquiry, the words barely made it out of my mouth before reverberating in my head, awakening me further. Sunlight peeked through the gap in the curtains, indicating that morning had arrived, prompting me to jolt upright.

I grabbed the smartphone to check the time.
9:12.
I flopped back onto the bed.
I hadn't overslept.

Today was the day Sendai-san and I were going to see penguins.

Though I had woken up later than I intended to set my alarm, I hadn't overslept. Since our outing wasn't until the afternoon, there was still time.

However, I hadn't had breakfast yet, which meant Sendai-san might come to wake me up, complaining about oversleeping or waking up late. She maintained a regular schedule even during holidays.

Thus, I figured I should quickly change, put on the facade of having woken up as planned, and head to the shared space.

But my body wouldn't move.
I felt drowsy and sluggish.

Where were we going to see the penguins?

I thought I was discussing it with the black cat and searching on my smartphone, but somewhere along the line, I must have fallen asleep. Probably, I got so caught up in indecision that it wore me out. Even with countless places to see penguins, I hadn't figured out where to go, and morning had come.

"...Still undecided."

The destination was still up in the air.
I pulled the black cat closer and squeezed its belly.

"What should I do?"

In hindsight, I should've left it to Sendai-san from the start. It's because I insisted on deciding for myself that I'm now in this predicament.

But it's not too late.
I could just tell Sendai-san, "Can you decide the destination after all?"

No, that won't work.

If I say that, she'll definitely respond with, "Miyagi always passes off responsibility onto others."

Words cursing my own recklessness surged in my mind. Despite this, the only decision I was sure of was that I would decide on today's destination myself.

Clutching the black cat to my forehead, I muttered "What should I do" again. But the black cat, which Sendai-san affectionately called "Roro-chan," didn't grant me Sendai-san's level of decisiveness. My mind became cluttered with curses aimed at myself.

I lacked the strength to even pick up the smartphone.
Turning over with a sigh, I heard a knocking at the door.

"Miyagi, you awake?"

Sendai-san's cheerful voice came from the other side of the door, reminding me of the black cat. It was the guardian of the bookshelf,

not my bed.

Rising and stepping off the bed left me feeling lightheaded.

It must be due to lack of sleep.
I'd spent too much time staring at the smartphone.

"Miyagi? Are you asleep?"

Sendai-san's voice was slightly louder this time, and after returning the black cat to the bookshelf, I opened the door.

"I'm up."
"If you're awake, at least get changed."

With that, she tugged at the sweatshirt I was wearing instead of pajamas.

"I'm about to get changed. Sendai-san, you're overly fussy."
"If you don't want me fussing, wake up earlier. Remember our plans for today?"

When I answered affirmatively, her hand released the sweatshirt.

"What about breakfast? If we're planning a slightly early lunch before heading out, we could combine breakfast and lunch."

It seemed she remembered what I had said yesterday.

Since it was already past nine, and we planned to have an early lunch, breakfast now would be too late. As she suggested, combining breakfast and lunch seemed wise—especially as I wasn't particularly hungry or craving food.

"…That sounds good."

The consequences of not getting proper sleep were more significant than anticipated, and once again, I regretted not leaving today's destination to Sendai-san.

"You seem really sleepy; are you okay?"

Sendai-san asked softly.

"I'm okay."
"Really?"
"Really. Stop nagging."
"I haven’t nagged you that much yet."
"You’re still nagging."

I retorted sharply, kicking at Sendai-san's legs, as her hand found its way gently onto my cheek.

"I'm not going to kiss you."
"That's not it."
"Then what?"

Peeling her hand from my cheek, she then placed it on my forehead. Her cool touch was comforting, and I felt my strength ebb away.

"Do you have a thermometer?"
"I don’t, why?"

The pleasant hand against my forehead reluctantly left me again.

My drifting body leaned naturally toward Sendai-san, and as I gripped the doorknob, her unusually serious gaze locked onto me.

"I’ll get one, so rest in bed, Miyagi."
"Why?"
"Because your face feels warm."
"So what if it's warm?"
"It means you have a fever."
"I don't."
"We'll know with the thermometer. If you hadn’t skipped properly drying your hair yesterday, you wouldn’t have caught a cold. Lie down in bed."

She gently maneuvered me like a soldier, guiding me into an about-face motion.

"What about the penguins?"

Back facing her, I asked.

"If you have a fever, you can’t go."
"I don’t have one, so I’m going."

It didn’t feel like I had a fever.

Besides, I wasn’t like Sendai-san who frequently got sick; I understood my body best. Today, I just felt a bit sluggish and lacked appetite due to sleepiness.

But Sendai-san seemed to think otherwise.

"The thermometer will tell us, so just wait a bit."

Sensing her presence retreating, I turned, but she was gone. With no other choice, I returned to bed and lay down. Before long, there was a soft double knock on the door, and "Can I come in?" was politely inquired.

"Go ahead."

With that, the door opened, and Sendai-san approached the bed, offering me the thermometer.

"Don’t want to."

Still lying down, I pushed her hand away.

"If you don't check, you won't know if you have a fever."
"I don’t."
"...Miyagi, are you the type to become a stubborn kid when you have a fever?"

Sendai-san mused, troubled.

"I'm not."
"Then be good and use it."
"I rarely get a fever; I'm fine."

I barely have any recollection of being bedridden from a cold.
I’ve never had a serious illness, and I consider myself sturdier than most.

"If you're so confident, prove you’re fine with this."

Reluctantly, I took the thermometer extended towards me.

Having been challenged this much, I had no option but to prove I

didn’t have a fever. I turned it on and took my temperature. The result appeared quickly, and just as I was about to check the numbers, Sendai-san snatched the device away.

"No penguins today."

Gazing at the thermometer, she declared, her expression serious while she gently readjusted the covers over me.

"Why?"
"37.9 degrees. By anyone’s standards, that’s a fever."

The thermometer, which was just taken away, was handed back to me. Evidence of my cold was displayed there, and I began to feel even more fatigued than before.

"…Just go by yourself, Sendai-san," I murmured.

I switched off the thermometer and placed it by my pillow.

"Go? Go where?"
"To see the penguins."
"I wouldn't go without you."
"Why not?"
"Because it wouldn't mean anything without you, Miyagi."
"Why not?"
"It would be boring alone."
"It might be exciting."

I mumbled this as I burrowed into the duvet. I hadn’t truly wanted to go that badly, but now that it seemed like I couldn't, I felt an inexplicable longing.

If this was how it was going to be, I shouldn't have insisted on deciding the destination myself. I should have let Sendai-san dry my hair yesterday. I shouldn't have even mentioned wanting to see penguins in the first place.

I was filled with regret, amplifying my sense of lethargy.

I was weary, unbearably hot, and even my breath seemed warm. When I emerged from the duvet, expecting to see Sendai-san by my bedside, she was gone. I wanted to sit up, but the thought felt burdensome.

"Sendai-san," I called softly, but there was no reply.

Was it because I didn't take my temperature like I should have? Because I failed to keep our promise to see penguins?

I wasn’t sure what I had done wrong, but it seemed Sendai-san had left, disappointed with me.

I felt like it was my own fault. Yet, I still wished for someone by my side, preferably Sendai-san.

I couldn't tell if I felt this way because I was unwell or if I would have wished for it regardless. I could hardly recall if I had ever thought such things on those rare nights I fell ill. All I remembered was being more afraid of being alone than usual.

My thoughts started sinking into an unwanted past.

I didn't want this.
I didn’t want this, I didn’t want this.
I didn't want this, I didn’t want this, I didn’t want this.

—Knock, knock.

Bright sounds came from beyond my unwelcome thoughts.

"Miyagi, I’m coming in."

When the voice meant to save me reached my ears, I called out, "Sendai-san," as she entered, carrying a penguin and a platypus.

"Here you go," she said as she placed the stuffed animals and tissue box covers around me. She even brought the black cat and the crocodile, arranging them on the bed.

"It feels like a zoo, doesn’t it?" Sendai-san chuckled.

"Why are you laughing?"
"Because you look cute surrounded by these stuffed animals, Miyagi."
"I'm not cute."

Grabbing the black cat, I attempted to throw it at her, but it was

snatched from my hand and returned to its original position.

"Just behave and lie down."
"It's too cluttered for me to sleep."
"Then, how about we chat for a bit?"
"I have nothing to say."
"But I do."

Without waiting for a nod, Sendai-san seated herself on the edge of the bed and started talking.

"Have you hidden having a fever in the past?"

The topic wasn't exactly pleasant, so I aimed to toss the penguin at her but, naturally, it was taken before I could launch it.

"So, Miyagi?" she asked, holding the penguin.

"I haven't hidden anything."

Sendai-san seemed unlikely to relent until I spoke, so I conceded with an answer.

"Really?"
"I don't catch colds."

Even when I was sick, I didn't measure my temperature. If I didn't acknowledge feeling unwell, then I wasn't unwell. Ignorance allowed me to get by with only feeling slightly off.

"From now on, rely on me," Sendai-san said, patting the duvet with a soft thud.

"What do you mean by 'rely'?"
"If you're feeling sick, admit that you're sick. It's normal. No more keeping secrets."

"…It's not normal for me," I admitted.

"It should be normal. Roommates usually mention when they're sick, right?"

"…Do they?"

"They do."

"Then you won’t keep secrets either, Sendai-san?"

"I won’t."

Sendai-san smiled, saying what I couldn’t ascertain as true or false.

There were times I could trust her and times I couldn't. It was because she didn’t always tell me the truth.

Then, as for the current Sendai-san—

My head was too foggy to think through it.

"Miyagi, why don’t you rest for a bit?" she suggested as her hand gently combed through my hair, stroking my cheek soothingly. Her touch felt as comforting as ever.

"I don’t want to sleep."
"Then let’s watch the penguins together until you doze off."
"How?"

"Like this," she said, placing the penguin plush on the bed and turning a tablet with penguin videos towards me, presumably brought along with the stuffed animals.

"Aren’t they cute, the penguins?"

Her gentle voice reached me. I couldn’t be sure if today was a day I should trust Sendai-san or not.

But having her close at times like these brought peace.

Therefore, today, despite being unwell, I wasn’t afraid.

Chapter 102

Miyagi Unlike Her Usual Self (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 294

Drifting back and forth between dreams and reality, Miyagi kept repeating this cycle after falling asleep while watching a video of penguins.

This is something that often happens when one has a cold, as I have experienced myself.

In the middle of an uncomfortable sleep, it's as if a hand reaches into your dreams and yanks you out, waking you up. Yet, you're immediately ensnared by overwhelming drowsiness, pulling you back into your dreams.

When breathing becomes difficult, anxieties and pains refuse to let go as they cling to you, driving you to feel the urge to lean on someone.

Possibly caught in a similar sensation, Miyagi occasionally called for me, grasping my hand. It was all because of the fever-induced troubled sleep, and though she was still Miyagi, she wasn't quite the Miyagi I knew.

Hazuki.

That's what Miyagi called me earlier.
I understand.
She's not the same; she's just a sick person now.

Referring to me as Hazuki was merely a delirium—there's no significance in that.

I figure I should go to my room to fetch some cooling sheets. I should have brought them along with the tablet, but it's not too late now. I ought to give her something to eat and make sure she takes

her medicine.

Yet, I find myself unable to stand up.

"...Shiori."

Sitting at the edge of the bed, I softly utter a name I usually wouldn't call.

Miyagi doesn't wake up.

Though she usually half-opens her eyes if I try to get up, right now, her eyes remain closed. Neither does she murmur her usual low complaint of "Don't call me by my first name."

"Shiori."

I call out with a slightly louder voice.
Miyagi still doesn't wake up.

As I gently touch the plumeria earrings I had chosen, intending to stand up, Miyagi's hand catches my arm.

"Sen...dai-san."

A broken voice calls me.
This time, she doesn't call me Hazuki.

Since falling asleep while watching the video, Miyagi has called for me six times, yet only once did she call me "Hazuki." Miyagi remains stingy with her affections, even when she's sick.

"I'm right here."

As I soothe her with gentle strokes to her head, the grip on my arm loosens.

This repetitive act makes me feel that Miyagi relies on me, and I find myself unable to shake off the bad thought that it might be nice if her cold never goes away.

I long for her to keep reaching out, searching for me.
I want her to call for me.

For her sake, even if she calls or reaches out, I should go to my room to get the cooling sheets and prepare a meal. I know what would be good for a sick person, yet I linger, watching Miyagi act spoiled.

This temptation is so potent that I find it hard to perform the simple task of walking to the adjacent room, and when I attempt to stand, I inadvertently rouse Miyagi instead.

"I'm sorry."

I apologize softly, placing the penguin watching over Miyagi onto my lap. Unsure about what to do, I stroke the toy's head.

I need a push.

Though I want to sit here and watch over Miyagi, I can't remain in this room forever. Even if I look away for a moment, Miyagi isn't likely to slip away, so I should focus on lowering her fever. Therefore, I hope for something that compels me to move.

I flutter the penguin’s wings, letting it land beside Miyagi.
As its belly touches her cheek, her lips part slightly.

"...Sendai, san...hot..."

Her raspy voice is accompanied by the penguin being pushed aside. As I absentmindedly ask, "Are you awake?" an indistinct "no" comes as her reply.

"Still sleepy?"
"Hot."

A faint voice reaches my ears, and I place my hand against Miyagi's forehead.
It feels warmer than before, so I also press my hand against her neck.

Her fever's rising.

What seemed to be a mere cold is more severe than I anticipated.

I recall Miyagi from yesterday.

Since her reluctance to comply isn't unusual, I should have insisted on drying her hair, even by force. Had I done so, she might not have caught a cold.

Perhaps she was already feeling poorly, and I simply wasn't aware of it. Miyagi isn't someone who would voluntarily tell me anything important, so I should have realized she might have been hiding her discomfort.

Fooled by Miyagi's lively demeanor, thinking she couldn't possibly get sick, was naive of me.

Because she's reluctant to show her vulnerabilities to me, I should have been more considerate.

"Should I put something cold on your forehead?"

I ask, my palm resting against her brow.

This is like a spell to make me move, which should be a simple act of fetching a cooling sheet. If Miyagi agrees, saying "yes," I'll be able to spring into action.

But there's no response.

"Miyagi, do you want something cold on your forehead?"

I call her gently, and her head faintly moves.
It seems to mean "yes," prompting me to reaffirm by asking, "Can you wait alone for a bit?"

"Y-yes."

A weak voice returns.

"Really?"

I wish she would say, "Don't go."
Such thoughts aren't good, but they emerge.

Thoughts that are best dismissed linger in my head as I clutch the sheets tightly, hearing Miyagi's small voice.

"Impor...tant...place..."

Half asleep, her voice is unclear.

"What? Say it again."
"This place is...important, so, Hazuki, you'll come back, right?"

As Miyagi's faint words are pieced together in my mind, I understand what she's saying.

More so than the fact that she called me Hazuki, I'm startled to learn that she considers this place important enough for me to always return. It's unexpected that she has such faith in that.

"I'll be right back, so wait for me."

Though it's more about returning than coming back, I say so and leave the room. I go to my room, fetch the cooling sheet, and in the shared space, I prepare some barley tea. It would be nice to have a sports drink, but since we don't have any, there's nothing to be done.

Back in Miyagi's room, I set the glass on the table.

Placing the cooling sheet on her forehead while she sleeps, I coax her awake.

"What is it?"
"You should drink some fluids."

As I bring the glass over, Miyagi sits up. After drinking about a third of the barley tea, she hands back the glass, saying "Thank you."

"Aren't you hungry?"

I ask as I return the glass to the table.

"Not hungry. Sleepy."

Miyagi lies back down on the bed weakly.

"I see. But it's better to eat something, so I'll prepare something in a bit."
"Okay."
"Go ahead and sleep."

"...Okay."

Slowly, Miyagi's eyes close as she looks at me. After a while, her quiet breathing indicates she's fallen asleep. I rearrange the stuffed animals scattered around Miyagi.

A penguin, a black cat, a crocodile, and a platypus.

I decide on positions that make Miyagi look cute.

"…Is it okay if I take a picture?"

Just to be sure, I ask her.
There's no response, but since she isn't refusing, I take a photo.

Even the click sound doesn't wake Miyagi.
Normally, she would complain, but now she sleeps without a word.

Maybe now, I could even say "I love you," and she wouldn't notice.

I kneel on the floor, gazing intently at the peacefully sleeping Miyagi.
My hand reaches toward her cheek, hovering briefly before retreating.
I inch a little closer to Miyagi.

The sentence I want to say is just three simple words.

I inhale, then exhale.
Hesitating slightly, I open my mouth.

"Shiori, you're adorable."

After whispering something safe and touching her cheek, her weak hand lightly swats me away.

"S-shut up."

"So that much you can hear, huh."

I'm relieved I didn't utter words like "I love you."
Rising to my feet, I take another photo before settling down on the edge of the bed again.

Miyagi Unlike Her Usual Self (II)

Part 295

My smartphone now contains three more photos of Miyagi.

I initially planned to stop at two, but one more mysteriously ended up being added. However, whether it's two or three photos, it probably makes little difference, and as long as I don't show them to Miyagi, I won't be subjected to any complaints.

I had considered recording a video as well but ultimately decided against it.

Keeping a video of a vulnerable Miyagi, reliant on my help, on my phone isn't necessarily a bad thing. But if I were to film something, I'd prefer it to showcase a lively Miyagi. Properly asking for her permission beforehand would be best.

Although, I doubt she'd ever agree to me shooting a video of her.

"Why are you staring at me?"

From across the table, Miyagi, who was begrudgingly eating the egg porridge I had made, furrowed her brows.

"I was thinking it’d be nice to record a video next time.”

"...A video of what?"

"A video of you, Miyagi. Is it okay if I record you?"

"Of course not."

"I thought you'd say that."

"If you knew, you shouldn't have bothered asking."

Miyagi spoke in a low voice before taking another bite of the porridge.

Seeing the bowl nearly empty, a wave of relief washed over me, knowing that Miyagi had a proper appetite. Considering she left some of the porridge from last night, this is a good sign. That said, she still had a fever of over 37 degrees Celsius earlier, so there's no real comfort just yet.

"Would you like some more?"

Given it was breakfast—and after what happened last night—I hadn't prepared much. However, if she wanted more, I'd gladly make another portion.

"Sendai-san, you're trying to fatten people up all the time."

"That's not my intention. I just wanted to ensure the porridge was filling enough."

I only want her to eat well and recover swiftly. My reason for making the porridge is solely that; I have no desire to have Miyagi gain weight.

"I'm full."

After Miyagi answered curtly, she quietly finished the leftover porridge in her bowl without looking at me and said in a soft voice —

"Sendai-san, is your body okay?"

"I should be the one asking that. Are you okay, Miyagi?"

Miyagi is the one who caught the cold, so any concern rightly belongs with her.

She should worry more about herself than me and recover fully as soon as possible. But instead of answering me, Miyagi grumbled, "But you were sleeping on the floor," sounding displeased.

"I'm fine, really."

I did indeed fall asleep on her bedroom floor, but she needn't concern herself with that.

After cleaning up from dinner, I wanted to be near Miyagi, who was

still feverish, so I went to her room. Watching over her, I eventually got sleepy and used the floor as my bed.

If Miyagi were in good health, she might have made space for me to sleep beside her, but I would never push aside a sick person to share the bed.

"...You complained about the pain when you woke up," Miyagi pointed out.

Her words, quiet as they were, didn't escape my ears.

"Sure, I was a little sore, but I'm fine now."

"You catch colds so easily, Sendai-san. You didn't catch mine, did you?"

"I'm alright."

Regrettably, I added silently.

There's a silly saying that you get better by passing a cold onto someone else, but if Miyagi could recover by transferring her cold to me, I wouldn't mind at all. Nonetheless, reality isn't that simple, and if I caught a cold now, there'd be no one to care for Miyagi.

"Forget about me; you should focus on yourself, Miyagi."

"I'm almost better."

"You still have a fever; you're not well yet."

"It's almost gone."

"You're not fully recovered until it's entirely gone."

"Fevers disappear quickly enough."

Miyagi overestimates her resilience.

Possibly confident in her physical strength, she doesn't seem to realize fevers can't be dispelled through sheer willpower. Even if it does subside, one could feel better in the morning, only to suffer a fever spike and discomfort by evening.

Complacency is dangerous.

If she’s been dealing with colds this way all along, Miyagi might not live long.

—And that would be troublesome.

"Saying things like that will lead to a bigger fever. Should I skip work today and stay with you?"

"...Even though I dislike your job, there's no need for you to do that."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not a child; no need to worry so much. Instead, make sure you eat properly, Sendai-san."

Miyagi said firmly, indicating the bowl of porridge in front of me.

"Okay, I'll be back as soon as I can, so behave yourself."

"I'm fine without being told."

Her low voice reached me, and I spooned some cooled porridge into my mouth. After a few bites, I glanced at Miyagi, meeting her gaze, which she quickly averted. As I took another bite, a soft "Thank you for the meal. It was delicious," came from her.

I replied with a simple, "You're welcome."

The porridge, which Miyagi claimed to dislike due to its blandness, seemed to have satisfied her taste.

"Sendai-san."

Miyagi called out to me in a near whisper.

"What?"

"Yesterday, I..."

Her faint voice trailed off, leaving the words unclear.

"Miyagi—"

As I tried to ask her to continue, my voice was drowned out by her slightly louder declaration of "It's nothing."

"Just say it, Miyagi."

"It's nothing."

"I'm curious now."

"If you're curious, erase all your memories from yesterday."

"That's impossible."

"Try anyway."

"Why?"

"Just because."

Miyagi glared at me as if refusing to let me speak further.

I can guess why she's like this. She must be concerned about her behavior yesterday, wondering about things she might have said or done.

Whether she remembers or not, I understand enough to know that she doesn't want me to see that side of her.

"Just to make sure, is the memory you want erased something you said while sleeping?"

Though I could let her dodge the question, I voiced my curiosity.

"...What did I say?"

Her voice was probing. It's clear she doesn't remember.

The fact is, she called out to me numerous times. She voiced a belief that I would return home to her.

While all of these things are precious to me, telling her would

undoubtedly lead to denial. That wouldn't be pleasant—just as unpleasant as the thought of Miyagi meeting someone else instead of me.

"You said you wanted a kiss."

I picked something likely to be denied and grinned.

"...I absolutely did not say that."

"But you did."

"I absolutely didn’t."

Miyagi declared, kicking my leg under the table. Though the strength made me cry out slightly, a cold "Serves you right" came from her in response.

"Shall we do it once you’re better?”

"Once I'm better, let's go see the penguins instead of a kiss."

The sulking Miyagi threw an unexpected suggestion my way.

"But we've already seen them."

While it was through a video, the goal of seeing the penguins has been accomplished.

"You promised we'd go see them. How about this Sunday?"

"Isn't that a bit soon? You might not be fully recovered from your cold, so why not a bit later?"

"No, it's not too soon."

"The penguins won't run away, so there's no need to rush."

"It's better to keep promises sooner rather than later."

"But you already kept the promise."

"Watching them in a video isn't the same as going to see them."

Miyagi seems inflexible. Although we haven't physically gone to see the penguins, I consider the promise fulfilled since we've seen them in some form.

Ultimately, whether or not we physically visit doesn't matter much to me. As long as Miyagi is by my side, I'm happy. While I'd love to see her delight in the penguins, her health is the more pressing concern.

"Do we really need to be so strict about it?"

"I want to keep our promises. So, please keep it too, Sendai-san."

"You really like promises, don't you, Miyagi?"

"It's not that I like them; I just hate when they're broken."

"Then, let's make it a promise to see the penguins someday."

I wouldn't mind if our commitments multiply—it would actually be delightful. I genuinely wish for more promises with Miyagi and to spend time together. However, I don't want her to hide her poor health just to uphold a promise.

"You always say things so carelessly, Sendai-san."

"I'm not being careless. This is another promise."

I stand up and lightly touch the plumeria earring Miyagi wears. I'd like to seal this promise with a kiss, but today isn't the day for that. There’s plenty of time to kiss Miyagi after she's back to full health.

Miyagi Unlike Her Usual Self (III)

Part 296

"I have a bone to pick with Sendai Hazuki, who, by far, is the least sociable person I know."

Mio's voice, tinged with dissatisfaction, comes through the smartphone.

Her voice is slightly lower than usual, but on a night walk back from my tutoring job, it carries an incongruously bright tone. Mio, ever the social butterfly, is like sunshine at any time, and even when her voice is tinged with vexation, that doesn't change.

"I don't think I'm that unsociable."

I refute Mio's words, bathed in the glow of the streetlights.

"You are. It's a long holiday, and you won't hang out with us at all."
"About that, I'm really sorry. I've been busy."

Will Hazuki come when we all meet up?
Join us for a shopping trip.

Mio asked several times during the holiday, but, just as she said, I declined every time. For me, spending time with Miyagi is the priority, and I also had work, so it couldn't be helped. However, the truth is that I'm aware it's unfair to Mio, and saying no always pricks at my conscience.

"You really have so many busy days, Hazuki. Even if I invite you to dinner right now, you'd turn me down, right?"

Her exaggeratedly disappointed voice is followed by a sigh.

"Is this call for that purpose?"

I initially thought it was just a call out of boredom, but apparently, there was an agenda.

"That's what this call is, but do you have time now?"
"Sorry. Could it be another time? It's a bit too abrupt for right now."

My plans for this evening are already set.

I quicken my pace.
A lukewarm breeze, even for a May night, brushes against my cheeks.

Increasing my walking pace, I draw closer to the house where Miyagi waits. If I keep walking like this, I should see her in less than three minutes.

"Invitations are always sudden. Sometimes you should accept them."
"Soon, I will. But not today—Miyagi caught a cold."

"Eh? Shiori-chan's sick? You should've told me sooner."

"This is the right time to mention it."

"Maybe, but how's Shiori-chan? Does she have a fever?"

As Mio fires off a barrage of questions and I answer while walking, the house where Miyagi waits comes into view. I take bigger steps, heading from the sidewalk to the building.

"I'm almost home, so—"

As I climb the stairs to the third floor and the entrance comes into view, readying my farewell to end the call, Mio's voice bubbles up, as if she had a bright idea, and stops me.

"Should I come visit?"

Her voice carries a tone of excitement, and she even cheekily adds, "Can I come over now?"

"There's no need for a visit; it's not that bad. Besides, it wouldn't be good if you caught it too."

I open the entrance door, pulling out words from my head to dissuade Mio, and step inside, removing my shoes.

What should I do?

I lean my back against the hallway wall.
I've been refusing Mio's invitations both before and during the holiday, so it's hard to just end the call. But I can't just continue talking here either. This morning, Miyagi had a fever. She might still have it.

I don't know when the perfect moment to end the call will come.

Deciding to keep talking with Mio as I move, I head to the shared space. There, Miyagi is at her usual seat, and I can't help but let out a sound.

"Eh?"
"Eh?"

Mio mimics the word I just blurted out.

"It's Miyagi."
"Did something happen with Shiori-chan?"

"She's eating ramen."
"She seems fine, then."

Mio's voice of relief filters through the phone, but I can't share that sentiment.

"Sorry, Mio. I'll call you later."

Unable to find a suitable moment to end the call, I hang up without delay and go over to Miyagi, who sits in loungewear.

"Why are you eating ramen?"

She's supposed to be resting.
If she's not, then at most sipping a drink.

That's all I could imagine for Miyagi when I wasn't around.

I never expected she would be eating cup ramen.

It's way too unexpected for her to eat dinner alone without waiting for me.

"I was hungry. Were you talking with Mio?"
"Yeah, but that's not important right now."

"It's not important? Isn't she your friend?"

Stopping her chopsticks mid-air, Miyagi looks at me.

"She is, but right now, Miyagi eating ramen is the issue. Why ramen?"
"I couldn't be bothered to cook anything."

"You should've waited for me to cook. Were you that hungry, unable to wait?"

I don't intend to sound accusatory, but my tone betrays me.

"Not really, I just thought since Sendai-san was working, I should do what I can myself."
"When you're sick, you shouldn't have to do anything yourself."

Having an appetite is a good sign.
I want her to eat well and get better quickly.
That's how I feel.

But I wish she'd waited for me.

If she'd waited, I would've made something more nutritious than cup ramen for her. If Miyagi claims I'm hers, she should let me do everything for her, ordering me if need be.

"My fever's already gone; I'm not sick."
"Are you sure?"

I place my palm on Miyagi's forehead.
I can't really tell, but it doesn't seem overly warm.
However, just using my hand isn't conclusive.

"Finish that, then take your temperature."

No matter how much I complain about the cup ramen, it won't suffice, and I don't intend to snatch food from her, acting immature.
The ramen isn't to blame.

Maybe it'd be better to make a simple dish for her now, or provide a

proper meal starting tomorrow.

Of course, that's only if Miyagi has room in her stomach.

"…I don't need to take it."
"You have to. If you don't take care of your cold, Mio will come."

"Mio has nothing to do with my cold."
"She does. She wanted to come visit you."

"For my cold?"

Miyagi looks puzzled.

"Yes, yours. If you don't want Mio visiting, get well soon."
"Did you tell Mio I was sick, Sendai-san?"

"I didn't mean to, but she wanted to meet up."
"…Are you meeting her now?"

Miyagi furrows her brow and steps on my foot.

"I refused, so I'm here."

As if satisfied with my answer, Miyagi removes her foot. However, her gaze drops to the floor and doesn't return.

"Was Mio's call about hanging out now?"
"She asked if we could have dinner together."

"Hmm."

Miyagi murmurs, still looking at the floor, and then quietly continues.

"…If you'd caught a cold, Mio would've come to see you, right?"

"No, she wouldn't."
"Why not?"

Miyagi lifts her face to look at me.

"Because with Miyagi here, I won't let her. ...Would you call Utsunomiya?"

As long as I have Miyagi, I don't need anything else, and even if she says she can't stay by my side, I need no one else but her.

But when it comes to Miyagi, I can't be certain.

Today, even if Utsunomiya had come over to visit while I wasn't around, I wouldn't be surprised. Considering the depth of Miyagi and Utsunomiya's friendship, such an occurrence seems only natural, and I doubt I could interfere if it did.

However, acknowledging their relationship and accepting it are two different matters.

If Utsunomiya had been here today, I wouldn't be able to help feeling something negative towards her. I should be the only one to see Miyagi when she’s vulnerable. Not just Utsunomiya—I don't want anyone else to see Miyagi like that.

"I wouldn't go out of my way to call her. Maika seems busy with work," Miyagi responds in a nonchalant voice. It's a hint that Utsunomiya hasn't come today, but it's not exactly a satisfying response.

But what if she wasn't busy with work?

If that basic assumption changed, perhaps a different answer might emerge.

"Did Utsunomiya ever visit you in high school when you were sick?"
"I didn't catch colds in high school."
"Well, if you had, would you have called her?"
"What about you, Sendai-san? Did you call Ibaraki-san over when you had a cold?"
"I'm the one asking the question."

Returning a question with a question is unfair. Though sometimes I let it slide, today I won't. I want her to answer my question first.

"...I wouldn't go out of my way to call Maika," Miyagi says in a low, disgruntled voice.

"What about now?"
"You're here now, aren't you?"

"Does that mean you can't call her because I'm here?"
"That's annoying. I didn't say that."

With considerable force, Miyagi kicks my leg, then asks, "Now it's your turn. What about Ibaraki-san?"

"I didn't call her. Miyagi was the only one who came to visit. I didn't want to invite anyone to my house."

In high school, I caught a cold and missed school several times, but I never called any friends over. Some people offered to visit me, but I refused because I didn't want them to know about that house, which was my house but not really my house.

Miyagi was the only one who came unannounced.

"Sendai-san," Miyagi calls quietly, lightly stepping on my foot.

"What?"
"Are Ibaraki-san and Mio-san the same kind of friends?"

"What do you mean by 'the same kind of friends'?"
"Never mind if you don't get it."

Without explaining her cryptic question, she abruptly changes the subject and calls out, louder this time, "Sendai-san."

"What?"
"Are you not going to university if you catch a cold?"

Another question with unclear intent.

"I guess if I have a fever, I shouldn’t," I respond with an obvious answer to her puzzling question. Suddenly, Miyagi stands up and grabs my clothing.

"Are you done with the ramen?"

As I glance at the half-eaten cup of ramen she left behind, Miyagi steps closer.

She tugs on my clothes.
Her eyes, which were on the ramen, meet mine.

She moves even closer and our lips touch.

The kiss is brief, only lasting a moment.

"Is this your way of saying you want me to skip university?"

I doubt such a short kiss could actually pass on a cold, but the timing seems suspiciously like she wants to make me catch it.

"I don't know," Miyagi says, releasing my clothes. She then sits back down and takes a sip of the barley tea beside the cup ramen.

Chapter 103

Sendai-san Isn't Nearby (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 297

"Miyagi-san, is that enough food for you?"

As expected, Asakura-san, sitting across from me, asked this as she eyed my emptied small dish.

It had contained udon, a "light" meal compared to my usual lunch. It's understandable she'd question if it was sufficient.

"It is. Actually, I'm quite full."

I responded while gazing at Asakura-san's chicken cutlet set meal.

"Dieting?"

She quipped before taking a big bite of her meal.

"No, no."

I waved my hand side-to-side, dismissing her misconception.

"Still getting over a cold?"

Maika from the seat diagonally in front of me paused eating her omelet rice to look at me intently. Even amidst the lively lunchtime clatter of the cafeteria, her voice carried a tone of concern that made me feel guilty.

The reason I chose a small udon for lunch isn't because of what Maika worries about. It's for a much sillier reason.

"I'm fine. Just ate too much for breakfast."

I shared the truthful answer with both of them.

The cold I caught recently passed quickly. I'm healthy enough to enjoy instant noodles at night again.

However, shortly after recovering, I ended up with another fever and became a concern to the ever-anxious Sendai-san, who took it upon herself to care for me—something that became quite a persistent issue, continuing even now when I'm healthy.

Specifically, at every meal, I'm served what Sendai-san considers "nutritious" food. This morning, she presented an enormous breakfast of stir-fried vegetables and egg soup—a quantity that could hardly be considered a breakfast, leading me to eat too much.

As a result, by lunchtime, I wasn't very hungry, managing only a small udon.

"If you have an appetite, that's good. But it's rare for Shiori to catch a cold."

"I let my guard down."

"Let your guard down? Wasn't it because you fell asleep with your phone and no blanket?"

Maika chided, taking a bite of her omelet rice.

"I just drifted off."

"That sort of thing leads to catching colds. Which is exactly what happened."

I nodded in agreement to Asakura-san's remarks.

There's no need to mention that I was browsing places to see penguins or that I didn't dry my hair properly. The cause of the cold is insignificant, and Sendai-san doesn't know the specifics either.

"But still, Shiori, it's a relief you have Sendai-san when you're sick."

Maika's voice reached me from diagonally in front, and Asakura-san concurred, saying, "Being alone when you're ill is unpleasant."

Being with someone is better than being alone. Especially if you're

sick and feverish.

Their opinions are valid, although if I were alone, I probably wouldn't have caught the cold or been bedridden in the first place. I might have gone through it without recognizing I was unwell, never bothering to take my temperature.

"Maybe I'll have Sendai-san come over if I get sick."

Maika suggested casually, adding she'd probably make something delicious.

That statement is undeniable.
Sendai-san prepared meals I could enjoy even with a diminished appetite while I was sick.
Maika is stating a fact.

But it doesn't sit well with me.

"In such situations, wouldn't you usually call me?"

Unlike in high school, Sendai-san is now among Maika's friends, but it's not Sendai-san's role to take care of Maika if she falls ill. That's supposed to be me.

Plus, Maika isn't aware, but Sendai-san is mine—not someone I'd lend out to others.

"You don't seem useful, Shiori."
"I'm very useful, actually."
"Will you cook for me then?"
"If it's something simple."

Sendai-san heading to Maika's house to cook exclusively for her is out of the question. Sendai-san should only be taking care of me, not Maika. All the delicious meals should be just for me, even if breakfast is so filling that I can't eat lunch.

"What about porridge?"

Maika suggested something that Sendai-san might manage but seemed beyond me.

"I'd bring instant."

"That's just no good."

Maika's critique doesn't bother me, because instant porridge is likely tastier than anything I'd make. Besides, you can't underestimate instant food. Many are far tastier than things made slowly.

"I might also bring instant. I've never made porridge. Can Utsunomiya-san?"

Prompted, Maika instantly replied "Impossible," eliciting a laugh from Asakura-san as predicted. They continued eating, digging into the chicken cutlet set and omelet rice.

My thoughts drifted away from the cafeteria, wandering toward Sendai-san, who attends a different university than us.

Sendai-san, who made rice stew when I refused porridge, stayed by my side while I was sick.

—Even when I was barely conscious.

The blurred, hazy memories remain unreachable, no matter how much I try to recall them. As a result, I can't remember what I might have said to Sendai-san at that time.

I have a faint memory of calling out to Hazuki.

And there's a sense I said something more.

But the memory stops at "saying something," leaving the content elusive. It might just have been a dream of talking with Sendai-san in my sleep, except reality hints otherwise—her seemingly good mood suggests I must have said something.

I definitely didn't say I wanted to kiss her.

Probably not.

It's not something I think about often, so why would I say it?

Yet, if asked what I did say, my memory blurs and fades away. If it pleased her, it likely wasn't something bad, but that's still troublesome. Anything that makes Sendai-san happy often complicates things for me and becomes a careless comment.

Well, a single comment might be okay.
But it might have been two or three things, or possibly more.

Sendai-san surely won't reveal it.
And I'm unlikely to remember.

It's pointless to dwell on it, yet I can't help it. But considering the clamor of the cafeteria, it's no place for serious contemplation.

Unlike the vague world through the lens of illness, this busy, clearly defined university world is overly stimulating. Despite being healthy now, such places make me long to return to the quiet home accompanied only by Sendai-san's soothing voice.

"Miyagi-san, wanna join?"

Asakura-san called my name amidst her conversation about watching a movie premiering next month with Maika. I responded, "Hmm, I'm not sure," though I did have interest in the movie. Still, there was a promise more important than any movie that I had to honor first.

I postponed replying for now, taking sips of my now lukewarm water while nodding along to Maika and Asakura-san's conversation. When my phone buzzed in my bag, I checked it to find a message from Sendai-san: "I'll be having dinner with Mio, so I'll be home a bit late." A sigh almost slipped from my lips.

An additional message explaining she was making up for something during Golden Week followed, but I couldn't fathom what needed to be made up for during that time.

Post-Golden Week at university is truly unbearable.
I wish holidays like Golden Week would vanish entirely.
Without them, there wouldn't be the dreaded post-holiday period, nor the need to "make up" for anything during them.

While I was mentally cursing the break like this, the two finished their meals. We attended our afternoon lectures, and then I parted ways with Asakura-san, who had errands to run, heading instead to Maika's part-time job venue.

I sit alone after ordering an orange juice and fries, selecting a

random seat. It's moderately busy and moderately noisy inside. I feel the urge to go home, but there's no point in going back early today.

Boring, boring, boring.

Just like how I go out with Maika, Sendai-san is simply out with Mio-san today. Yet, for some reason, it feels duller than usual.

The proximity I enjoyed with Sendai-san while I was sick makes her current absence even more unbearable.

I don't want to acknowledge this reality.

Like familiar sights reflected in the window of a well-trodden train, I wanted these everyday moments to blend into the background.

Noticing changing signboards or old buildings torn down hits with unexpected clarity, making one constantly notice the new emptiness. Similarly, I'm hyper-aware of Sendai-san's absence.

I mindlessly nibble on fries I don't particularly want. The fries, ordered because occupying a table with just a drink felt rude, taste unappealing to my current self.

I crave Sendai-san’s cooking.

I munch on a fry, washing it down with orange juice.

Being alone is dull.

With a sigh, my gaze drops. The floor and people's feet come into view. Amongst countless feet moving and people flowing, a pair of vividly colored shoes approach nearby.

"Mind if I join you?"

I don't know who the voice was directed at, but the restaurant isn't busy enough to require sharing a table.

They must be joking with a friend.
That's likely the case.
Thinking such, I reach for another fry when someone takes a seat across from me.

"Hello."

A woman, joining without an invitation to share the table, smiles at me.

Long black hair.
A slightly intimidating aura.
Someone I've met before and, truthfully, hoped not to meet again.

"Alright, Miyagi-chan. Here's a quiz. Who am I?"

"…Noto-san."

"Correct. I'm glad you remembered."

With those words, Noto-san wore a familiar, friendly smile.

Sendai-san Isn't Nearby (II)

Part 298

At the end of my gaze, there's a fry.

I can't decide whether to lift or lower the corners of my mouth.

Noto-san is an acquaintance of Sendai-san and is also connected to Mio-san. Just knowing that makes me feel gloomy. And because I'm stuck with someone I barely know, the atmosphere is unbearably awkward, causing my eyes to focus solely on the fries.

Right now, I wish I knew the right expression for this situation.

There might not be a correct answer, but I'd like to have one.

"Miyagi-chan, do you like fries that much? Want me to give you mine?"

A cheerful voice calls from across the table, drawing my eyes from the fries to Noto-san, who offers me a chicken nugget.

“No, thank you. Actually, that’s not even a fry, is it?”

“Most people would call it a chicken nugget.”

Noto-san smiles warmly.

There are no fries on her tray. There’s only chicken nuggets and a drink, making it blatantly clear she just wants to tease me. However, I can't glare at her the way I would at Sendai-san.

The only thing I can manage is a vague smile, which brings a starkly quiet moment amid the ruckus of the cafe. The silence is quickly broken.

“That was just a little joke to ease the tension, so don't worry about it.”

As Noto-san speaks, she pops a nugget in her mouth, chews,

swallows, and then looks at me intently.

“Actually, Mio told me you’d be here, Miyagi-chan.”

“Eh?”

“Didn't you hear it from Sendai-chan? Sendai-chan is with Mio right now.”

“I’ve heard...”

It’s infuriating.
Genuinely infuriating.

I got a message from Sendai-san at lunch saying, “I’ll be late because I’m having dinner with Mio.” Before my afternoon class, I told Sendai-san, “I’m going to Maika’s workplace, so I’ll be late getting back.”

Only Maika, Asakura-san, and Sendai-san know I’m here. Yet, for some reason, Noto-san knows, which means Sendai-san told Mio-san, and somehow she conveyed the information to Noto-san.

Whether Sendai-san is close or not, she’s always up to no good, constantly saying unnecessary things.

“I wanted to see you, Miyagi-chan, so I came all this way, but I'm glad you were here. This is your friend’s workplace, right?”

I respond with a curt “yes” to the words likely relayed to Noto-san from Mio, who heard them from Sendai-san.

Sendai-san's acquaintances are unpredictable. Previously, a student she tutored suddenly appeared and caused trouble for me. The current troubling situation feels like it could lead to something even worse, making me want to flee.

“You seem a bit down. Look at your friend at the counter and try smiling.”

Noto-san breaks into a bright smile that's nothing like the somewhat intimidating impression I initially had of her. But I’m more concerned about what she just said and can’t help but ask.

“Did Maika serve you?”

“Is your friend’s name Maika-chan? If she’s serving, she must be one of them, right? Everyone looks pretty friendly over there.”

Noto-san glances towards the counter, and I realize I’ve given away unnecessary information.

“...That was a bit of a trick question. You’re sly.”

“It wasn’t meant as a trick. You’re cute, Miyagi-chan.”

Getting caught in her tricks is my fault.
I must accept that all this is my own negligence, but my resentment towards Sendai-san, who caused this situation, only grows. I stifle the sigh trying to escape and pick at a fry.

It’s tasteless.
I sip on the orange juice.
It tastes no better.

It feels like I'm chewing on clay and sipping muddy water.

“Miyagi-chan, I think you’d be even cuter if you smiled like those kids over there."

Noto-san looks over at the counter where Maika is as she speaks to me with a smile.

This woman is more difficult to deal with than Mio-san.

Though Mio-san is cheerful, talkative, and candid to the point of being annoying, she’s still more tolerable than Noto-san. I've a feeling that speaking with the woman in front of me for too long would lead to trouble.

“I’m not good with cute stuff.”

Unable to muster friendliness towards Noto-san, I use a partial truth to dodge her request.

“I see. So, Miyagi-chan, do you not like sharing tables either?”

“I’m not good at it.”

Noto-san nods slightly after I indirectly confirm what's impossible to hide.

"I got bored after Sendai-chan took Mio away, so I came here hoping you'd keep me company... But if you're not a fan of sharing tables, maybe I could leave if you answer a question."

"A question?"

"Yes, a question. May I?"

"It depends on the question."

"Well, it's easier if I'm direct; are Miyagi-chan and Sendai-chan dating?"

Cheerfully.
As if it's no big deal.

The words slip from Noto-san's lips, and they don't register in my mind. They fragment upon reaching my ears, scattered and disconnected.

Sendai-chan.
Miyagi-chan.
Dating.

The words are simple, but my brain refuses to process them. It results in a "Eh?" emerging in a voice I'd never use with a senior.

"Oh, didn't catch that? Shall I repeat myself?"

Though her tone is light, it isn't teasing. It's serious. I realize that her previous question was genuinely earnest.

"...That's okay."

"Good to hear. So, what's the answer?"

Her voice is still light.

But it's no joke, and so I piece together the fragmented words, delivering the truthful answer.

“Sendai-san is my roommate.”

No more.
No less.
Since becoming a university student, Sendai-san has been my roommate, and she will remain so until we graduate.

“Miyagi-chan. You probably know this, but that’s not an answer. I asked if you were dating, not if she’s your roommate. The answer should be either you’re dating or you're not. So let's try again.”

Noto-san speaks like a university lecturer, clears her throat, and takes a sip from her cup—its contents unknown. Then she speaks clearly for me to hear.

“Is Sendai-chan your girlfriend? Answer with a yes or no.”

Noto-san’s eyes look straight into mine.
They aren’t menacing, but they’re slightly intimidating.

Compared to Sendai-san, she carries a cool aura demanding clarity, unlike the ambiguity I can slip through when talking to Sendai-san.

Left without the option to say “roommate,” I’m forced to choose between “yes” or “no,” and the answer is clear. Yet, my mouth refuses to move.

Why.
Why do I have to endure this?

Before I even need to think, it becomes clear that the absent Sendai-san is responsible for my predicament.

I take a light breath in and out, releasing the tension from my shoulders. Instead of choosing "yes" or "no," I respond with another question.

"Did you ask Sendai-san that question too?"

"Do you think I did?"

"Replying to a question with another question is unfair."

"But aren't you doing the same, Miyagi-chan?"

"…"

Noto-san is right, and I can't argue back because she's correct and I'm not. Feeling stuck, I lower my gaze to the fries, but her voice softens even further.

"I'm not mean, you know. I can answer your question in return. I did ask Sendai-chan, and she said you're her girlfriend."

The answer, which doesn't sound like something Sendai-san would say, reaches my ears, prompting me to look up.

"That's a lie, isn't it?"

"Got caught, huh? As an apology for lying, shall we change the question? Would your answer—being 'roommates'—change?"

"It won't change."

"How formal of you both. Isn't Sendai-chan a friend?"

"She's my roommate."

"So, you two aren't that close, then?"

Noto-san's tone becomes increasingly lighter, a smile forming at her lips, as if enjoying herself.

As for me, my voice drops lower, and it feels like weights have been attached to the corners of my mouth. This isn't fun; it's just dull and the worst.

"Not answering means you two aren't close, right?"

"We're normal."

We aren't on bad terms. Therefore, it's necessary to correct her misconception.

"But you're not friends, then?"

"Do we have to be friends?"

"When you're close, you'd refer to someone as a friend or best friend, right?"

It's bothersome.
Annoying.
I wish her presence would blend into the background noise of the bustling cafe.

But I can't say that.
So, I let it be.
I drink the now warm orange juice, hoping Noto-san will refrain from asking any more vexing questions.

"It's okay if you don't want to answer, but how about I change the topic? Does Sendai-chan have a girlfriend or boyfriend, besides you?"

My wish doesn't reach Noto-san. She uses the dicey word "girlfriend" again, looking straight at me.

"—Why ask such a thing?"

The words wrapped in her question roll across my mind without finding a place, continuously in motion. "Girlfriend, girlfriend, girlfriend" echoes in my head, refusing to form meaningful sentences.

"Maybe because I'm curious about the secretive beauty's schedule. Sendai-chan keeps giving excuses to decline her friends' invitations —mainly Mio's, and isn't swamped with enough part-time work to justify it. It's not unreasonable to suspect she has a lover, right? Mio seems curious about Sendai-chan too, so wouldn't it be good to clarify here?"

Even as she asks, I can't agree with Noto-san.

I'm not concerned if Sendai-san has a lover because, whether or not she does, she belongs to me.

That's the promise, and regardless of who's around her, she has to remain mine.

Sendai-san must certainly keep the promise we made.

Breaking it is unacceptable.

"Miyagi-chan, are you not the least bit curious about Sendai-chan?"

Noto-san directs the question to me in response to my silence.

I think she talks too much.
I hadn't expected her to be so chatty.

"...I'm not curious."

Reluctantly, I answer, sipping the warm orange juice, growing increasingly annoyed by the surrounding chatter.

It's noisy.
This place is too loud.

But it gets even noisier because Noto-san starts talking again.

"Well, it's not like I'm planning to do anything with this information. I'm just concerned that the perfectly innocent Sendai-chan might be taken advantage of by the wrong people. It'd be bad news if she's being financially exploited by a bad guy or girl."

I can't understand her words. It's like they get lost amidst the clatter coming from left and right, leaving only fragments lodged in my mind.

"Mio really likes her, so it'd be troubling if she went down a bad path."

Saying this, Noto-san bites into a chicken nugget, halting this unwanted conversation.

"I don't think I can answer anything about Sendai-san."

"And why's that?"

"I don't know as much about Sendai-san as you might think."

"Even if you don't know her well, when you live together, you'd know if she has a lover, right?"

"……"

I don't understand why I have to answer such a question.
I dislike Noto-san.
I wish she would leave soon.

"Miyagi-chan is truly cute."

I am not cute.
The only ones allowed to say such things are my friends and Sendai-san.

"As per our little agreement, I should take my leave soon. Thank you for the enjoyable time, Miyagi-chan. Let’s have a meal together next time; it’s on me.”

I reply curtly to her cheerful tone.

“I’ll pass.”

“No need to be so reserved.”

Noto-san, who said she would leave if I answered her question, steps away, leaving me behind at the table.

Sendai-san Isn't Nearby (III)

Part 299

I bring the back of my hand close to my nose. It carries a pleasant scent reminiscent of Sendai-san, causing me to stretch out on my bed. However, my hand feels sticky, prompting a sigh.

Closing my eyes, I attempt to erase the all-too-familiar ceiling from my view.

The sticky culprit covering my hand is a hand cream that Sendai-san gifted me for Christmas, identical to the one Maika has. While it's the same brand and type, the fragrance isn't the same. Though similar, they differ, and I've only used mine a handful of times.

—Maika mentioned she had already used all of hers.

I exhale deeply. I don't want Sendai-san to come back. Yet, I do want her to come back. These conflicting feelings clash and unsettle my heart.

Neither feeling outweighs the other, leaving me at a loss. Although these are my feelings, they refuse to conform to my wishes. They swirl around inside me without blending, trampling through the depths of my heart.

True to her message, Sendai-san hasn't returned yet.

We attend different universities and have different friends.

Even though we live in the same house, our differing lives mean that, unless we make an effort, our schedules drift apart. On days like today, when she has plans with friends, it's easy for our schedules to not overlap.

As this trend continues, we might end up leading separate lives while living together. It's not unusual for two roommates like Sendai-san and me, who aren't particularly close or distant.

I open my previously closed eyes.

I pick up the black cat plush by my pillow and almost begin to pet it, stopping myself. Petting it with hand cream-coated hands might leave the plush sticky or scented.

Since coming home, it's been about an hour or two. I'm not entirely sure, but quite some time has passed.

"…Sendai-san belongs to me, after all."

Even if I wish she wouldn't return, since she belongs to me, she should hurry back to this home.

I touch the wall separating my room from Sendai-san's, slowly withdrawing my hand to lightly knock on it.

No response comes.

I position the black cat to face the wall. Curling up, I close my eyes. My phone remains silent.

Floating in the darkness created by my closed eyes, I hear the familiar knock, knock.

My eyes refuse to open. My body won't move.

Stiff on the bed, as if under a spell, I again hear the knock on the door.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san's voice calls my name.

"I know you're there."

The knocking continues. I wanted her to come back, believed she should come back quickly, yet because part of me doesn't want her to return, my body remains motionless.

My mind is filled with indecision, overflowing onto the bed.

"Hey, Miyagi."

An impatient voice rises, followed by a slightly louder knock.

"I'm coming in, okay?"

Even as she says this, Sendai-san doesn't enter.

"Are you not feeling well? Are you okay?"

Her voice outside the door shifts to concern. However, she's courteous. Since I haven't granted permission, she doesn't come in. Left alone, she'd probably stand outside waiting indefinitely. Reluctantly, I stretch out my arms and legs, easing my stiff body to get up and open the door.

"You don't have to knock so much; I can hear you."

I address the anxious-looking Sendai-san.

"Miyagi, if you're there, please open the door quickly. You had me worried. Are you feeling unwell?"
"I'm fine. I was just sleeping."
"Really? You haven't caught a cold?"
"I didn't. Besides, if I didn't answer the knock, I might not have been here."
"I saw your shoes at the entrance, so it would be odd if you weren't home."

Sendai-san points out logically, reaching a hand toward me. Before I can dodge, her hand touches my forehead.

"Doesn't seem like a fever."

She mutters as if to herself, eliciting my grievance, "I didn't say you could touch me."

"Miyagi, are you upset?"
"I'm not. If you need something, say it."
"Want to eat pudding or ice cream together? I bought some from the convenience store."
"You aren't holding any."

I kick Sendai-san's foot standing before me empty-handed.

"They're in the fridge."
"Sendai-san, you should eat them all. I don't want any."

Turning her away dismissively, I try to shut the door, but she catches my arm. I lean toward her, planting my foot firmly to resist the pull, stepping back. As I peel her hand off my arm, it brushes my cheek.

"Miyagi."

Her soft voice catches my gaze.

Her beautiful face moves closer, sealing my lips with hers.

"It's strange to kiss right now."

I push against Sendai-san's stomach as she quickly pulls away.

"It's just a kiss; what's wrong?"
"There's plenty wrong. Why did you kiss me?"
"Because I wanted to."
"If you want to kiss so much, do it in your own room."
"If I go back to my room, I won't get to kiss Miyagi."

Sendai-san really doesn't say anything sensible.

All her words sound absurd, and I don't believe this is what I want to discuss with her. But even if I try to think of something I want to talk about, nothing comes to mind.

Too much has happened today.

I feel like there's a lot I want to say, yet at the same time, I don't wish to speak at all.

"Even if you stay here, you can't kiss me."

I tell Sendai-san, and she retorts, "Then, how can I kiss you?"

Sendai-san, at times like this, has the persistence to attempt kissing as many times as needed, so I push her away, gripping the doorknob. Yet, she closes the distance, bringing her face nearer.

"I'm not doing it."

Covering her mouth with my hand, something moist brushes against

my palm. Clearly, it's the tip of her tongue, causing me to hurriedly pull back my hand.

"Miyagi, your hand smells nice."

Her words remind me of the hand cream.

I regret having applied it.

As I instinctively hide my hands behind my back, she asks, "Do you not like that hand cream?"

"Why?"
"You've hardly used it."
"It's not like I like it or dislike it."
"I see. What about the scarf?"
"I'll use it when it gets cold."

Like or dislike. The answer falls between those two, and the words I uttered aren't what she asked for. Yet, Sendai-san smiled, "Good," and continued, "If you don't want a kiss, I won't give you one. Let me in."

Like a well-trained dog, Sendai-san waits for my 'okay' in the shared space.

I don't dislike her behavior, but it sometimes gets on my nerves.

I kick Sendai-san's foot, gripping her clothing tightly.

"Miyagi, did something happen with Utsunomiya?"

Despite asking to come in, Sendai-san, who doesn't actually attempt to enter, suddenly mentions my best friend's name.

"There's nothing going on with Maika."

"What do you mean by 'with Maika'? Did something happen with someone else?"

"Nothing happened."

"Then why the bad mood?"

"I'm not in a bad mood."

This is true; I'm not in a bad mood. If anything is amiss, it's because of Noto-san.

However, I don't want to talk about Noto-san with Sendai-san. Mentioning Noto-san would only bring her back to mind, and thinking about her would lead me to thoughts better left forgotten.

"Are you upset because I got home late?" Sendai-san probes.

I drop my gaze to the floor.

Not a single piece of trash is visible.

On closer inspection, there might be a speck of dust, but our home is always tidy. Sendai-san and I make sure of that.

It's best to keep important places clean. That's what I believe.

"It’s strange to be mad just because a roommate comes home late," I mutter and give the gleaming floor a little kick.

"Go ahead and get mad," she replies.

"Even though we're just roommates?"

"Since we live together, it wouldn't be strange to be angry."

Sendai-san quietly asserts.

Even if Sendai-san had a "lover"?

That question springs to mind.

"…Sendai-san."

"What is it?"

I lift my gaze from the floor to look at her.

Even without asking her, I know that there's no one in her life who could be deemed a "lover." Having lived with her until today, there hasn't been anything to suggest otherwise.

But that might not last forever. Someday, someone like that might appear.

Even so.

Maybe I'm the only one who believes that Sendai-san will continue to be mine. Promises aren't kept unless we both choose to uphold them.

Today, the bond of being mere roommates feels rather tenuous.

I can hear Noto-san laughing in my mind.

—I don't think I could tolerate Sendai-san having someone like that in her life.

"…Come on in."

What I wanted to say was something else entirely. But sticking to the words I've spoken, I open the door wide.

Chapter 104

The Unreasonable Requests of Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 300

Three steps from the shared space.

Upon entering Miyagi's room, a soft, muttering voice reaches my ears.

"Welcome back."

Her voice reminds me of the important words I had forgotten, perhaps due to her not coming out from her room.

"I'm home."

I intend for my voice to be gentle, yet Miyagi's expression remains unchanged. Since opening the door for me, she has maintained a furrowed brow, a look of dissatisfaction fixed upon me as if glaring at me.

However, Miyagi's sour mood doesn't bother me right now. What's more important is her presence by my side, and that's fulfilled.

Yet, there's one significant issue. Today's bad mood is different from the usual. If asked how it's different, I'd struggle to describe it, but something is definitely "off."

My chest feels uneasy. Today, I am blameless.

—Or I should be.

I informed her I would be late and returned as quickly as possible. I followed the rules for living together as roommates.

I approach Miyagi, who stands rather than sits in front of the bed. I sit on the floor by her side, but a low voice soon descends upon me.

"Don't sit."

"Does that mean I should stand?"

"Figure it out yourself."

Her thorny tone tells me standing won't improve her mood either.

There's no point in gauging Miyagi's mood.

Even the pudding and ice cream I bought likely won't cheer her up, and anything else would be equally futile.

Even if I stand, her voice full of displeasure will still be hurled at me. That seems predetermined.

Yet, not standing is not an option.

"Is this okay?"

I stand up from the floor and look at Miyagi.

"You're in the way."

Sure enough, she speaks in a voice that's not hiding her bad mood. I'm accustomed to Miyagi's unreasonableness, but I'm at a loss when criticized whether sitting or standing.

I should have declined Mio's invitation.

There's no rule against meeting friends, but the only plausible cause of her foul mood seems to be that. If only jealousy was the reason for her emotions, but I can't discern anything like that in Miyagi right now.

"Where am I not in the way?"

I ask sourly, but no answer comes. Probably, I'd be in the way no matter where I stand. Though ridiculous, my very existence might annoy her today, and the thought of that tightens my stomach.

At this rate, she might tell me to leave. Avoiding her gaze, I look down at my feet. Suddenly, she softly calls, "Sendai-san." As I

answer, Miyagi falls silent again.

While pondering what to do, I glance at the bed and notice something unexpected.

Unusual.

The black cat plush usually on the bookshelf is now on the bed, staring at the wall. The atmosphere darker than Roro-chan's hue needs changing, so I pick up the plush.

"Meow."

Emulating a cheerful cat's cry in place of the black feline, Miyagi's frown deepens.

"Roro-chan's in a different spot today?"

Continuing, I press Roro-chan's nose against Miyagi's brow, which prompts her to push me away, annoyed.

"…She wandered over, so put her back on the shelf."

"Don't make Roro-chan sound like a ghost cat."

Plushies don't wander on their own, meaning Miyagi moved Roro-chan from the shelf to the bed.

She mentioned sleeping as a reason for not emerging from her room, which would imply she took a nap with Roro-chan.

But, likely, she's lying about sleeping.

"It's scary if ghost cats exist. Don't say weird things."

"Ghost cats are still cute, aren't they?"

I'd like to ask why Roro-chan was on the bed, but I know asking would only sour her mood further, so we stick to light topics.

"Not cute."

"If it was scary, you could call me. I'll keep you company."

"Two people in the bed is cramped, no thanks."

"You're stingy."

"Being stingy is fine."

Miyagi murmurs before sitting on the bed.

"Can I sit too?"

"You can, after you put that back on the shelf."

Following Miyagi's indication towards Roro-chan, I return the black cat to its usual spot. I set myself beside her, but she points to the floor, and once again, I sit as instructed.

When I try to meet Miyagi's eyes from the floor while she's on the bed, she kicks my leg. Helplessly embracing my knees, I tidy my skirt.

"…How was Mio-san?"

She inquires quietly. Though her voice doesn't sound irritated, it isn't particularly cheerful either.

"She was excessive."

"I see."

I can't discern Miyagi's expression now.

"What do you do at university, Sendai-san?"

Asked a question with only one answer, I reply curtly, "Study," and Miyagi falls silent.

Today's silence is heavy. Darker than ink.

I haven't been bothered by the silences between Miyagi and me for a long time, but today, the darkness encroaches inwardly, compelling me to speak.

"What are you doing at university, Miyagi?"

Studying with Utsunomiya.

When I pose a question whose answer is obvious, she retorts with a flat "studying," followed by, "Hey."

"You're saving your part-time job money for after graduation, right?"

Her voice, though murmured, is clear.

"Yes, that's right."

"…Not spending it?"

"Do you want any, Miyagi?"

"I don't need it."

After her reply, silence descends as if the air itself is nearly audible.

"Is there nothing you want, Miyagi?"

I ask brightly, trying to pierce the film of silence enveloping the room.

"No."

"Want me to buy you a plushie?"

"Don't bother."

Miyagi says dismissively, filling the room with another silence.

Today feels off.

The atmosphere doesn't change. The more we talk, the heavier and darker it surrounds us.

"Sendai-san."

"What? Did you think of something you wanted?"

Though I knew that wasn't what she was talking about, I ask, and she kicks at my knees, prompting me to look up at her.

"…Lick my feet."

Miyagi states clearly, though softly. Our eyes don't meet. She won't align them.

"Why would you suddenly say something like that?"

"I'll pay you five thousand yen. Just do it."

"That's not a reason."

"No reason needed. Just an order."

Miyagi, avoiding eye contact, adds, "I'll go get the five thousand yen now," as she starts to stand. That's when I firmly call her name, "Miyagi."

"You don't have to get it."

"Why not?"

"Because I won't lick your feet."

I'm willing to follow orders. Licking her feet isn't much of a big deal. I'd do just about anything Miyagi asks.

But I'm not going to lick Miyagi's feet just because she offers to pay five thousand yen for no reason.

At this point, five thousand yen shouldn't matter between us. Offering it undermines the relationship we've built since becoming university students.

"...Why?"

"I just don't think that's something roommates do."

"You've tried to do it yourself before, Sendai-san. Why are you saying this now?"

Her voice shifts from flat to tinged with dissatisfaction, and the foot resting lightly on the floor gives me a gentle kick.

"What's going on today? Did something happen?"

Miyagi is acting strange. While her strangeness is not unusual, this time it's directed in an odd direction. Her mood is lost, drifting aimlessly. But I can't figure out why.

"...Rules."

Her nearly inaudible voice drops from the bed. I instinctively respond with a puzzled "Eh?" before she speaks more clearly, words I can comprehend.

"Last year, we set some rules for living together, right? Do you remember them?"

"Of course."

Friends can visit, but they can't stay over. Give notice if coming home late.

These are just some of our detailed rules, but those two are the absolute ones we can't break. Today, I've followed those rules, letting Miyagi know I'd be late and refusing Mio's request to stay over.

"We don't need those rules anymore."

Miyagi's surprising words, unexpected from someone so committed to agreements, make a shocked "Eh?" slip from my lips.

"We don't need those roommate rules anymore."

With her declaration, Miyagi wraps her arms around her knees atop the bed.

The Unreasonable Requests of Miyagi (II)

Part 301

There had always been rules between us. From the day I met Miyagi at the bookstore, they were naturally present.

They were what bound Miyagi and me together. Without them, we would have merely remained classmates and never shared the same time and space.

Thus, dismissing them with a throwaway comment like "We don't need them anymore" is unacceptable. I don't know what Miyagi's intentions are, but abolishing the rules is something that cannot be allowed.

"If we're going to live together, we need rules, right?"

I look up at Miyagi, who is sitting on the bed with her knees hugged to her chest.

The rules we created after becoming roommates are essential when living with someone else. Not allowing friends to stay overnight and notifying each other when coming home late are ways to avoid trouble.

The other rules about daily life serve the same purpose. They might be minor, but it's better to have them than not. Trying to eliminate them is plain absurd.

"We don't need them."

Miyagi quietly refutes my words. I tap my fingertips on the floor and clench my hands tightly. Miyagi's response isn't favorable.

"What about my opinion?"
"I won't listen."

Without looking at me, Miyagi directs her gaze at her own toes.

Her words indicate that this conversation won't turn for the better,

and I squeeze my hands even tighter. My nails dig into my palms.

—I won’t allow it.

I can't read Miyagi's thoughts when she doesn't look at me, and even if she were to, I doubt I'd understand. Yet, it feels like Miyagi is about to suggest dissolving our roommate relationship, casting a gray cloud over my heart.

The rules are meant to protect our relationship as roommates. To abolish them is akin to wanting to end that bond.

My thoughts become muddled. The heavy silence makes me want to flee.

"Sendai-san—"
"Miyagi, aren't you acting strange today?"

I cut off her words with my own to drown out what I heard. It’s not that I want to speak, but I feel that I must prevent Miyagi from speaking.

"I'm not strange."

Though an irritated voice comes through, I'm the one who wishes to speak in a voice full of annoyance.

"Then why suddenly say we don't need the roommate rules?"

I mimic Miyagi's low tone.

It’s a poorly chosen question.

The question might prompt Miyagi to end our roommate arrangement.

I bite down on my lip at my blatant slip-up.

Though I initiated the roommate arrangement, it was Miyagi who bound me with those words. She trained me, ensuring I wouldn't step outside the definition of a roommate, making me follow her instructions.

—A cherished curse.

Even though I chose to suppress my feelings, weighing them against my bond with Miyagi, it was through the existence of the word "roommate" that I could continue holding back the words I longed to convey.

I love Miyagi.

This emotion, which I have sealed away, has been continuously refined by the word "roommate" into a form deemed proper by Miyagi, bringing me to where I stand today.

I don't know what lies beyond when the spell is broken.

I don't want to know. Miyagi's current demeanor instills no optimism for the future.

"I'm sorry. Let's forget my last question. How about we end this conversation? We can decide the rules again and talk about it properly another time."

I smile at Miyagi, who isn't looking at me, and receive a detached reply, "There's more to discuss."

It's hopeless. If this conversation continues, something bad will happen.

The feelings sealed within me will remain tomorrow and the day after that. And the bond we've preserved without conveying this indelible feeling is our relationship as roommates.

Just as Miyagi clings to the word "roommate," so do I.

"Can't we do this another time?"
"No, we can't."

Miyagi declares resolutely. Then, having not met my gaze before, she now locks eyes with me and takes a small breath.

I must stop her.

Even though I think this, I can't even produce a small voice from my throat.

Breathing becomes difficult. My breath catches. Miyagi's mouth moves, and I can hear her voice.

"I'm ending our roommate relationship."

The strength leaves my hands, which have been tightly clenched, and the world loses its color.

Black and white.

Those are the only colors visible to my eyes, and a bleak monochrome world unfolds before me. The gray cloud in my chest becomes part of the monochrome scenery and envelops me.

I can't see Miyagi through the black and white.

"Does that mean we won't live together anymore?"

I question Miyagi, who should be there but feels absent.

"We'll live together until we graduate from university, but we'll stop being roommates."

Live together.

Those words momentarily calm my turbulent heart, only to have it roil again. The statement about ending our roommate relationship feels unnecessary and excessive. It leaves me unsure about whether to be happy or not, and I can't understand her reasons for saying such a thing.

"...What could have happened for us to live together but not be roommates anymore?"
"Nothing in particular."

"That's a lie. What are you thinking?"

Silence. Nothing penetrates the solitude.

The world remains like an old black and white film with Miyagi blending into the room. The silence turns my vision into a shade of gray. As my desire to live together, even just as roommates, collapses, like grains of sand, it erects a wall between Miyagi and me.

I try to call out, "Miyagi."

No voice emerges. The too-quiet room doesn't permit optimistic thoughts like ending our roommate relationship to become lovers.

Perhaps...

Maybe Miyagi has found someone she likes.

This realization comes too late, something I should have noticed earlier. If she wants to stop being roommates, it’s not unreasonable to think such a thing has occurred. She might already be dating someone I don't know, wishing to live with them instead.

Though I haven't seen any indication of that, if it weren't the case, she wouldn't suggest ending our roommate relationship.

Once this thought enters, I can't let it go. My mind keeps spiraling to negative conclusions, and I’m flooded with thoughts that push me to the depths of despair.

"It was you who said, 'Let's stay roommates,' Miyagi. Isn't it irresponsible to take back what you said on a whim? Take responsibility and continue being my roommate."

I call out to Miyagi, hoping she'll dismiss my pessimistic thoughts. But Miyagi, being who she is, doesn't conform to my expectations.

"No."

Her small voice clearly rejects me.

I've believed that Miyagi holds some affection for me, even to the extent of allowing kisses and beyond.

But apparently, I was wrong.

This is a reality hard to accept, and my mind struggles to deny it.

"Why don't you want to?"

Miyagi is heading in the wrong direction. I want to correct the course of this conversation.

"I don't want to say."

Miyagi's voice drifts in, and I exhale softly, trying to dispel it. I let down my tied hair, hoping for a change in mood.

—Though, nothing changes.

In this monochrome world, I search for Miyagi's dark eyes, trying to meet her gaze.

"Is it okay if I sit next to you?"

"Do as you like."

Her flat voice reaches me, and I get up from the floor. As I sit beside Miyagi, the bed creaks, affirming my presence. But still, Miyagi's presence remains uncertain.

"I don't think it's right to decide on your own to stop being roommates. Shouldn't we talk it over first?"

I address Miyagi. The "roommate" relationship I initiated, which Miyagi decided on, shouldn't end without me understanding what happened. Even if it has to end, it's something that should be concluded together, since it started with us both.

Miyagi and me.

Neither of us should end it unilaterally.

"Talking won't change anything."

Miyagi states curtly and continues.

"Sendai-san... Since we're ending the roommate relationship, listen to me about one thing."

Exchanging one thing for another.

We'd had many such exchanges between us, but the past "somethings" were usually enticing enough to compel me into a deal.

Today is different. This feels detestable.

"I'm not accepting such conditions."

The negotiation Miyagi is attempting was destined to fail from the start.

"You have no choice in the matter, Sendai-san."
"Why?"
"Just because. You don't have the right to refuse."

Miyagi, with a tyrannical air, announces this and takes hold of my hand, which was buried in the gray turmoil of my crumbling view. Her unexpected warmth makes my arm twitch, but her hand remains firmly around mine.

She grips my hand, and I lose the chance to retort.

"...What are the terms?"
"Sendai-san belongs to me, right?"

Instead of answering, Miyagi repeats a familiar exchange from our past.

"Yes."
"Then you shouldn't belong to anyone else. Even if someone says something, don't follow them, and don't meet those kinds of people. Stay as mine 'only.' "

Her grip tightens painfully. The warmth of Miyagi, transmitted through her touch, makes her black hair seem even darker.

Seeing the red of her lips, color returns to the world once painted in black and white.

"...What about friends? Are friends not okay too?"
"Friends... I have them too, so."
"So they're allowed?"
"...Only if they're truly friends."
"Is that the only condition?"

"Yes."

Her small voice brings certainty to what had felt uncertain about

Miyagi.

I still don't understand why Miyagi decided to eliminate the word "roommate," but the condition aligns closely with what I wanted, making my previous despair at the bottom of the pit feel foolish.

Yet, I can't feel entirely happy. A relationship that loses something it relied upon becomes unstable.

It teeters and wobbles, and applying too much pressure might cause it to collapse entirely.

Miyagi is cautious and timid. Our joined hands can easily separate at any moment.

"If that's the only condition, I'm okay with swapping out being roommates. But let's not get rid of the rules. It'd be troublesome if friends stayed over, or if there were no notice when coming home late."

I reciprocate Miyagi's grip, handing over the fragment of "rules" that kept the essence of "roommate."

Our feelings don't quite align yet. Until we're on the same page, we need something to bind us.

"...Alright."
"Then, it's a promise."

I release her hand and touch Miyagi's ear. As my lips approach her earring, I feel a gentle push on my shoulder.

"I'll do it."

Saying so, Miyagi reaches for the blue stone on my ear.

The Unreasonable Requests of Miyagi (III)

Part 302

Miyagi’s fingertips graze my earring. She caresses the stone as if confirming its shape, tugging gently at my earlobe. The promised kiss I anticipated remains unfulfilled.

Miyagi's birthstone.
A stone signifying I belong to her.
And my ear, the cherished base for these earrings.

She continues to toy with it. It’s a bit ticklish, yet enjoyable. She won’t meet my gaze. Her eyes are fixated on my ear.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

When I question her, still focused on my ear, her fingers detach from the earring, and a voice neither pleased nor displeased responds.

"I will, you don't need to tell me."

Yet, those words are not immediately put into action. Again, she touches the earring, playing with my earlobe.

It feels like a ritual of sorts.

As if something bad might occur if she skips a step, she inspects the earring and strokes my ear. It doesn’t feel unpleasant. After all, the earrings are what Miyagi chose for me, and these ears have long been hers. Since they were a birthday gift to her, she can do as she pleases.

A span of time that’s neither short nor long passes before Miyagi's lips press against my ear, promising the continuation of our "roommate rules". Even though we aren’t roommates and I’ve become "Miyagi’s only," the rules we set last year remain unchanged.

It’s frightening to destroy everything we've built together in over a

year. Having something that doesn't change allows me to cling to it. Living with someone like Miyagi, whose feelings toward me are both uncertain and undefined, makes having something definite all the more important.

"Miyagi."

I call her name softly. The promise sealing kiss on the earrings continues. I touch her shoulder, tracing my fingers along her arm. Her lips pull away only to reconnect again. It's a series of pecking kisses like a small bird feeding, until suddenly, my earlobe is caught between something hard.

"Miyagi, that hurts."

Even tapping her lightly on the shoulder doesn't alleviate the pain. Her teeth sink into my ear, radiating heat.

It feels like I can almost hear a scraping sound as she bites harder, refusing to heed my plea, and I grip her shoulder. I'm used to this kind of pain, but being used to it to it doesn't mean it hurts any less.

"Hey, Miyagi!"

Pain is still pain.

I grip her shoulder tightly and call "Miyagi" once more, and my ear is released. But my relief is only for a moment, as now something hard presses against my neck, throbbing painfully.

"Watch where you're biting."

I'm more concerned with the spot she's marked than the pain itself.

She's marking a place that's difficult to conceal if she left visible marks. If Mio discovers a mark there, she'll pester me endlessly.

Yet, I can't bring myself to forcefully stop Miyagi.

I want people to see Miyagi's mark.
To know I belong to her.

Even if it hurts.

With a mark left by Miyagi, I can feel her presence even when we're apart. I wish this moment could last forever, but the word "university" flickers in my mind, and I grab her wrist.

"Miyagi!"

Even though she can hear me, her teeth keep pressing firmly into my neck. As the sensation fades, the pain becomes less discernible. Matching the force coming from my grasp, Miyagi finally moves away from me.

"Save those noticeable marks for summer break."

I can't see without a mirror, but there’s no way there isn’t a mark.

"I bit you because it's not summer break."

"What does that mean?"

"So everyone will notice."

And with that, Miyagi touches my neck. Her fingers caress a mark I cannot see, her palm resting gently against it.

"It’s troublesome."

"You're mine, so it's fine if there's a visible mark."

Miyagi is truly selfish and willful.
She doesn’t consider my feelings at all.

Despite thinking that, her words carve deeply into me, sparking a sense of joy. Being Miyagi’s only makes me happy, prompting me to accept this flawed reasoning as truth.

"Does that mean I can tell people you bit my neck?"

"You don’t have to say that."

Her palm slides along my neck, stroking my collarbones over my clothing. Her voice is cold, yet her touch feels warm. I yearn for more of it.

"What should I say if someone asks about this?"

"Figure it out yourself, Sendai-san."

The hand that had been brushing against my collarbones moves to my hair, and Miyagi leans in toward my neck again. This time, against what must be where the mark is, her lips press firmly.

This time there are no teeth, no pain.
No marks will be left.
Her lips kiss my neck repeatedly.

She touches my shoulder, pushing me down. My back meets the bed, and while kissing my neck, Miyagi begins to suck on the skin strongly.

"Are you leaving another mark?"

No matter how many marks show I belong to Miyagi, it never feels like enough. But considering university, having multiple marks on my neck is problematic.

"No."

Miyagi lifts her face.

"Then what is it?"

I gaze up at Miyagi, who has pushed me down.
Our eyes lock.
She doesn’t avert her gaze but remains silent.
Her hand touches my neck.
Her fingers graze the mark, gently trailing along my neck.

"...I want to... with Sendai-san."

It's a murmur.
A faint, almost missed whisper escapes Miyagi.

"Eh?"

I can’t help but ask, but there's no reply.
The faint echo of her voice lingers in my mind.

Want to... with Sendai-san.

That’s what it sounded like.
Probably not just a kiss.

In this situation, saying something like that implies something more.

...Eh?

I might’ve misheard.

"Miyagi, just now—"
"I won’t say it again."

Interrupting my words, Miyagi rises from the bed.

"You'll do it even if you don’t say it, right?"
"I won’t."
"Why? You just said you wanted to."
"You didn’t agree, Sendai-san. You just said "Eh." "
"Hey, that’s unfair."
"It’s not."

With that firm declaration, Miyagi gets off the bed, sitting down with the stuffed crocodile under the table.

Naturally, her back faces me.
But she doesn’t tell me to leave the room.
Though not seeing her face is unsatisfying, it can’t be helped.

Miyagi said something unlike herself.

It must’ve been something significant for her, and because I asked for clarification, it’s my fault. Although no matter how often I say “let’s do it” or invite her again, she won’t accept.

I know Miyagi is that kind of person.

"Can I ask a question?"

Since pulling out the words I desire from the current Miyagi seems nearly impossible, I shift the topic to something with more potential.

"What?"

"We’re not roommates anymore, right?"
"Yes."
"And we're not friends, are we?"
"Yes."

Miyagi continues answering with her back to me.
I take a small breath in and exhale.

Conflicted about whether to ask, I toss a pillow at her back.

The pillow lands on the floor with a soft, pathetic thud, but Miyagi doesn't turn around. Taking another breath, I address her back once more.

"Then, what are we now?"

As expected, Miyagi doesn't turn around. There’s no response either.

I've run out of things to toss.

With a sigh, I prepare to get up when a small voice reaches my ears.

"...People living in something important."

"I see."

Not bad.
Miyagi's words describe us better than the term "roommates" we've been using until now.
Though it still feels somewhat lacking.

Chapter 105

Sendai-san as Usual, Yet Different (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 303

I don't want to go to university.

I slowly circle the room. I woke up an entire hour earlier than usual, got dressed, and I'm ready.

But I don't want to go to university.

If I go, I'll see Maika, and if I see her, she'll ask about yesterday.

"Wasn't that person you were talking to Sendai-san's senior, Shiori?"

Since a message like that had come about the events at her workplace yesterday, I replied, "Yes," only to be asked whether she lived near there and why we ended up at the same table.

In the end, I gave her a vague reply like "I don't really know, it was a coincidence that we met and talked about Sendai-san." But it wasn't enough to escape her probing.

So it's impossible that no one will ask me about yesterday.

I can dodge the details of the conversation as much as I want. However, I don't want to talk about Noto-san.

I let out a big sigh.

I shouldn't have gone to Maika's workplace.

I should have just gone straight home without making any detours. If I had done that, I wouldn't have seen Noto-san, and I wouldn't have had to discuss Sendai-san. If nothing had happened, I would have just enjoyed either the pudding or the ice cream that Sendai-san had bought yesterday, had a little chat, and ended the day as

roommates, and today would have started off the same way.

—No, I can't.

I mustn't regret.
Regretting what happened yesterday means recalling it, which leads to remembering what I said to Sendai-san yesterday.

I let out another sigh and stand in front of the bookshelf.

The black cat meets my eyes.
My stomach feels heavy.

"...Meow," I mutter complaints to the black cat as if it understands.
Because the stuffed toy couldn't walk back to its place on the shelf, Sendai-san found out that I sometimes place the black cat on my bed.

It's the worst.

I said things that weren't mine to say yesterday and even showed something I never wanted to show.

I press my index finger against the black cat's forehead.

The fact that I have this black cat close by is my secret, one I haven't told anyone else, and having the black cat near me brings me calm, a secret shared with none.

It's truly bothersome.

I had always been careful, cautious, and never forgotten to return the black cat to its rightful place until yesterday.

That wasn't me.

The me who leaves the black cat on the bed isn't me. The me who told or wanted to tell Sendai-san I want to stop being roommates isn't me.

Sendai-san must've thought this was strange, too.

I take another lap around the room.
Even though I know I shouldn't feel regret, I do indeed regret it.

On a day like this, it's okay to skip university.

That's what I think.
I won't be of any use today, even if I go.

But I can't just not see Sendai-san. It's about time for her to wake up, and if I stay cooped up in my room, she'll keep knocking on the door until I come out.

If I don't go to university, she won't either. She'd stay home all day waiting in front of the door for me to come out.

I'd feel bad if I caused Sendai-san to skip university because of me.
Despite feeling this way, there's also a part of me that thinks it wouldn't be so bad to skip university together.
If we stayed away from university forever, Maika wouldn't be able to question me.
I could keep Sendai-san confined to this house.

At that thought, I remember that Sendai-san has her part-time job today.

"That's no good."

If I said I wasn't feeling well, or begged her not to go, she'd probably skip university. But she'd definitely go to her job. Even if she somehow became mine alone, that wouldn't change.

What I gained in exchange for a roommate.
I'm not dissatisfied with it, but it's not absolute.

Overall, I've become unsure of what face I should have when talking to Sendai-san. Should it be the same as yesterday, or a different one? Since I don't know, I can't settle down.

"What should I do?"

I talk to the black cat and glance at the door.
Even if I have no idea how to spend the day, I know I can't just stay holed up in my room. At the very least, I have to leave by breakfast time.

I let out yet another sigh.

If we're going to see each other anyway, I might as well be in the shared space before Sendai-san. Being called out from my room or going there afterward might be more awkward.

I breathe in, breathe out, and go to the door.
After another breath, I grip the doorknob tightly and open the door with spirit.

"Whoa!"
"Eh!? Sendai-san?"

We didn't collide.
But I was surprised to find Sendai-san standing right in front of the door after I opened it.

There was no knock.
I didn't hear a voice.

Perhaps I was too lost in thought to hear, but judging by Sendai-san's expression, that shouldn't be the case. She seems surprised too, as if she hadn't expected me to come out of my room.

"...Good morning, Miyagi," she mutters.
How rare.
Today, she's avoiding eye contact with me.

"Good morning... Why are you standing here?"
"I thought we could prepare breakfast together... Can you help me?"
"Sure. What are we making?"
"Hmm, what should it be," she says, not looking at me, walking toward the fridge. I follow right behind her. There's a sound of footsteps, then they stop. That's because Sendai-san stopped, so I had to stop too.

Near the table.
Sendai-san turns back to me.

"Aren't we going to make breakfast?"

I ask, and get a "yeah" in response. She grabs my wrist.
Then, lightly pulling, she embraces me.

"I never said you could do this," I complain to Sendai-san, who does

things without permission.

"Is it not allowed?"
"No."

Even though I clearly refused, she tightened her arms around me.

Her hands wrapped around my back.
Our bodies pressed together.
The familiar scent of shampoo.

It's all quite pleasant, and my heart begins beating twice as fast as usual.

"Is kissing okay?"

A voice in my ear asks.

"Not now."

Her arms holding me tight, yet not painfully so.
Her soft body.
Her silky hair.

All of them belong to only me, and my heart beats loudly.

"Miyagi, you're stingy. Nothing will change like this."

Even though she's complaining, her gentle voice is comforting.

"We don't need to change, so let's just make breakfast quickly. We'll be late for university."

I push Sendai-san away and escape from her arms.

"It’s not like we're running late."
"Sendai-san, be quiet. Just tell me what to do."

I step on the distracting Sendai-san's foot.
When I apply a decent amount of pressure, Sendai-san finally meets my eyes, something she hadn't done at all until now.

"Then, could you get the eggs and ham, Miyagi?"

"Got it."

I release my foot from hers and head to the refrigerator. I take out the eggs and ham as she requested. While Sendai-san cooked them in the frying pan, I set the table.

Preparations for breakfast finished quickly, and, as usual, I sat down.

On the table were fried eggs and ham, rice and miso soup, chopsticks, and cat chopstick rests. Across from me sits the person who lives in something important.

The breakfast menu changes daily, but the dishes and cat chopstick rests remain unchanged. Though Sendai-san is no longer just my roommate, the rules for living together haven't changed. In this house, some things change, others stay the same.

"Sendai-san, make sure to come back early so we can eat pudding together."

Last time it was tofu, but today we're having miso soup with wheat gluten. It's as delicious as ever.

"The pudding I bought yesterday?" Sendai-san asked, looking at me while eating her fried egg.

"Yes."

"We have ice cream too, though."

"Pudding is fine."

"I'll come back as soon as I can, but I have work, so is it okay if it's at the usual time?"

"If it's the usual time, there'll be a penalty game."

"What time is 'the usual'? Can you please define it?"

"I'll decide that when you get back."

"Ehh," she groaned exaggeratedly, adding, "Isn't that harsh?"

"It’s not."

"Oh well. But if I manage to return home at a time you consider early, then you have to listen to me."

"No way."

Her counteroffer wasn't great. She always suggests things that put me in difficult situations.

"Come on. I won’t ask for anything complicated."

"What’s something not complicated?"

"You’ll find out when I get back," she teased with a smile.

Sendai-san as Usual, Yet Different (II)

Part 304

Miracles don't happen easily.
At university, I found myself caught by Maika, who continued to chatter about what had happened at her part-time job yesterday.

This reminded me of a similar situation from the past.

Back in high school, I recall being grilled by Maika and Ami about Sendai-san coming to the classroom to call for me.

Unlike back then, I have a bit more I can talk about now, but that didn't mean I could share everything that happened yesterday. There's quite a bit I want to keep to myself, and being probed deeply would be troublesome.

I had prepared what to say to Maika during my commute, which was why I was managing to keep up, but I didn't think I could hold out much longer.

I wished someone would come to my rescue soon.

"Shiori, have you gotten close with Noto-san?"

Before the lecture starts, Maika, sitting beside me, says this gleefully.

Starting from her name, I had just explained to Maika what I knew about Noto-san. As a result, Maika had become quite curious about her.

"Hmm."

It's hard to say we've gotten close.
But saying we're not close would cause friction.
As I hesitated on how to respond, my phone in my bag notified me of a message.

The timing was perfect.

I felt relieved.

"Sorry, give me a moment."

Apologizing to Maika, who looked like she wasn't done talking, I dug into my bag to check my phone and saw Sendai-san's message.

'Thanks to Miyagi, Mio grilled me.'
'What's that about?'
'You know what I'm talking about.'

I had a vague idea.
I asked Sendai-san, knowing what she might have been interrogated about.

It was the mark I left on the nape of her neck yesterday.

Mio must've questioned her because the mark was still there. Sendai-san had attempted to hide it rigorously with concealer, and I didn't notice it right away in the morning.

—Mio found such a mark.

That meant Mio looked at Sendai-san closely and noticed what I couldn’t, despite Sendai-san's effort to conceal it.

I tightened my grip on my phone.

The mark I left on Sendai-san, a sign that she's "mine and no one else's," should be noticeable to anyone looking, I thought. But no one other than me should be allowed to look at Sendai-san in such a way.

The same goes for her tutoring students.

Today, she has her tutoring job, but the mark I made, a sign of her being mine alone, should be noticed by her student. Even though the student shouldn't look at Sendai-san that closely.

'You covered it, so she wouldn’t find out, right?'

I sent a message denying what happened to Sendai-san, and a response quickly came.

'She noticed. I said it was thanks to Miyagi.'

"What?"

I instinctively let out a sound and covered my mouth.

"Did something happen?"

Maika asked, looking puzzled.

"Ah... no, nothing. Apparently, Sendai-san lost something."

"Oh, even Sendai-san has those moments?"

I replied to Maika, "She's only human, after all," and then returned my gaze to my phone, replying to Sendai-san's bizarre statement.

'That's a lie.'
'It's true. Though she didn't believe it at first.'
'Really?'
'Mio was laughing, saying there's no way Shiori-chan would do something like that.'

From the text alone, I couldn't decipher whether Sendai-san was telling the truth or not. I wanted nothing more than to call and verify, but calling Sendai-san in front of Maika was something I didn't want to do.

Having ruled out what I couldn't do, all I could do was send another message back, replying, 'Then that's fine,' and put my phone away.

"So, what did Sendai-san lose?"

Maika inquired, and I reluctantly answered.

"Uh, a report, it seems. She was asking if I mistakenly took it."

"Did you?"

"I didn't. Probably just left it at home, I think."

I said something that might be plausible for anyone else but unlikely for Sendai-san. She's never forgotten a report at home, and likely never will.

"Really? Maybe you actually brought it? You should check."

Maika joked and prodded, "Did you put it in your bag?"

"It's not in there."

"I see. Still, forgetting something, even Sendai-san isn't perfect, huh? I guess it's obvious, but she really is an ordinary person. I should have gotten to know her better back in high school."

With that, Maika gave a big sigh and lightly tapped my shoulder.

“If you'd introduced me to Sendai-san sooner, Shiori…”

Though I knew she was joking, Maika's words struck a nerve. The secret I had kept hidden awakened a sense of guilt, making me want to avert my eyes from her.

"Sorry about that."

I apologized softly and glanced at the bag holding my phone.

Yesterday, a new secret formed within me.
Sendai-san had become something other than just a roommate.

It's not something I can tell Maika. But I wish she’d notice the mark Mio found. But that doesn't mean I want my secret known.

When considering Sendai-san, contradictions arise everywhere. With no way to resolve them, the result is a dull ache at the back of my mind.

“If you’re truly sorry, that’s fine. Anyway, back to our earlier topic—did you get close with Noto-san?”

Maika's cheerful voice hit my ear, prompting a sigh that almost escaped.

"Uh, yeah. Kinda?"

I lied with a noncommittal answer. It'd be troublesome if Noto-san and I truly became close. She’d probably ask things even more intrusive than yesterday's questions, which I wanted to avoid.

“Kinda, huh.”

As Maika mused, Asakura-san arrived, ending a rather inconvenient conversation for me, and the two began discussing their part-time jobs. Relieved, the lecture began, and half of my day slowly passed. Today felt unusually long, lunch dragged, and even afternoon classes seemed to stretch on for eternity. Yet, university eventually ended, and I parted ways with the two, heading home.

Unlike Sendai-san, who had work, I went straight home without any detours. There was pudding at home, so I didn't buy snacks. There was no calico cat around, the one Sendai-san often noticed.

So, as planned, I arrived home. Naturally, Sendai-san hadn’t returned yet.
I sat in the shared space, gently rubbing my neck.

There were no marks on me.
But there was a mark on Sendai-san.

I was eager to see that mark, but she was still not home.
This morning, I was too distracted to examine them properly.

I took out the calico cat chopstick rest from the cupboard.
Sendai-san's room housed its companions.
And a platypus.
As memories accumulate, so do objects.

With her birthday coming up, followed shortly by mine, more memories will accumulate and our possessions will only increase. The once blank calendar now fills with writing, and memories gain labels.

Even if I were to offer to let her lick my feet again in exchange for 5000 yen, we couldn’t return to the past.

Yesterday made that clear.
It's futile to try and trace the past.

Every day is a new update, turning both of us into a newer version of ourselves.

Marks that went unnoticed before are suddenly found.

The Sendai-san who returns home later will not be exactly the same as she was this morning.

I hope she returns soon.
I want to see Sendai-san keeping her promise.
That's what I wish for.

Chapter 106

Miyagi's Things and Mine (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 305

"That's mine——"

It shouldn't be the first thing to say upon entering the house instead of a simple "I'm home."

However, what confronted me as soon as I stepped into the shared space practically demanded it.

"What?"

In front of Miyagi, who spoke in a flat tone, were a cup of instant noodles and a chopstick rest.

I find it odd that she would order me to come home quickly so we could eat pudding together, only to find her eating instant noodles. Yet, Miyagi eating instant noodles is not all that uncommon.

The issue lies with the chopstick rest.

She is currently using a calico cat chopstick rest, which is mine and not Miyagi's.

"What do you mean...?"

I hesitate whether to point out that the chopstick rest she's using is mine. If I mention it, she will definitely be in a bad mood. Yet, I want to ask.

“Did your chopstick rest break?”

I change to a less confrontational phrasing and comment on the item before her, bringing her gaze to it.

"Chopstick rests aren't the kind of things that break, you know?"

Miyagi says, a frown forming on her forehead.

"I know, but still..."
"I'm done eating, so I'm going to clean up now. Have a seat, Sendai-san. Oh, and welcome back."
"Thanks. We're going to eat pudding soon, right? Why not wash everything together later?"
"I'm washing them now."

The reason she used my calico cat chopstick rest instead of her own black cat one remains unexplained. Instead, Miyagi noisily pushes back her chair, stands up, and begins tidying away the finished cup noodles, chopsticks, and chopstick rest.

“Didn’t I tell you to sit over there, Sendai-san?”

She scolds as I stand watching her bustle around. Knowing it's pointless to argue, I obediently sit in the chair as instructed.

The sound of water flowing from the faucet reaches me.

I can’t tell if she deliberately chose the calico chopstick rest or if it was just a coincidence.

But for Miyagi, it seems like something she's awkward about, as she takes an inordinately long time to wash the chopsticks and rest, not facing me at all.

Perhaps she has changed a little.

I reflect on these thoughts in regards to Miyagi, who is no longer my roommate.

Miyagi eating instant noodles was no different than usual.
But the chopstick rest was something different.

Even a slight change would make me happy if something within Miyagi is evolving.

I think it would be nice if Miyagi continues to use my things as if it were normal, starts wanting my things, and eventually wants me too.

"Shall I prepare the pudding?"

I ask Miyagi, who still faces the sink.

"Not yet."
"How long are you going to stay there?"

Her using my calico cat chopstick rest and refusing to face me makes me curious about the expression on her face.

"I'm coming."

After her grumpy response, the sound of flowing water ceases. However, Miyagi still does not look at me.

"...Is it true that you told Mio-san about the mark I left yesterday?"

A small voice reaches me.

I understand immediately what she's referring to and respond with a simple "Yes."

Though I had concealed the mark Miyagi left on me yesterday so it wouldn't stand out, it wasn't done perfectly. It wasn't surprising that Mio noticed, and I wanted it to be noticed.

So, when Mio asked about the mark on my neck, I answered that Miyagi was the one who left it.

“Mio-san really didn't believe you, right?”
“She didn’t. She asked to see my boyfriend instead.”

That seems understandable.

I expected Mio to say something like that, and it was natural for her to think I was trying to cover it up when I said it was Miyagi.

"...Are you going to show her your boyfriend?”
“I can’t show what doesn’t exist. I already told Mio I don’t have one.”
“Did she believe you?”
“She didn’t."

Mio insists that I have a boyfriend.

It's turned into quite a hassle, but it would have been equally troublesome if she had believed that it was Miyagi who left the mark.

Honestly, I shouldn't have told Mio, even jokingly, that Miyagi left it. I should have covered it up by pretending I have a boyfriend. Asking someone to act as my boyfriend would have settled things.

But I didn't want to lie about it being a "boyfriend-made mark," and I really didn't want to go through the trouble of finding someone to pretend to be a boyfriend.

"What about your tutoring students?"
"They didn't notice… I think. Even if they did, they wouldn't connect it to Miyagi, so it's fine."
"Then that's okay."
"You don't sound okay with it."

Since she won't look at me, I can't tell what expression Miyagi is wearing. But her tone is utterly displeased, indicating a source of dissatisfaction.

"...Even though it's a mark I made, it's irritating that others think someone else did it."

Miyagi still won't meet my gaze. Though she finished washing, she just stands there, avoiding eye contact.

I want to know what kind of face Miyagi is making when she says such things.

I stand up and move closer to Miyagi.

"If it's fine with you, I'll tell Mio again that the mark was made by Miyagi, not anyone else."

As I tug at her clothes, Miyagi looks at me.

"You'll say it because she won't believe you."

A monotonous voice reaches my ears.

Our change is subtle, merely the fact that we are no longer roommates. Yet, a change means what wasn't allowed yesterday might be allowed today. That's what I'm hoping for.

I want to know how far I can push the boundaries with the current Miyagi.

"…Maybe I should try harder to convince Mio."

If the reason doesn't matter, I could make it known that the mark on my neck is "Miyagi's."

For instance, saying Miyagi sleepily bit me.

As absurd as it is, if I could make Mio believe such an anecdote, the mark on my neck would become "Miyagi's" in her mind too.

"No need for weird efforts."

The idea to make an effort so Mio acknowledges the mark as "Miyagi's" is promptly dismissed.

I think it's understandable.

Miyagi is that kind of person.

"More importantly, Sendai-san…"

Changing the subject, Miyagi sits down. Naturally, I sit across from her. She nudges my leg saying, "Penalty game."

"Why? I came home early."

If I had come at my usual time, there would be a penalty game.

Having insisted I come home early this morning, Miyagi set this condition, and I assuredly returned home earlier than usual today. It's essentially a ridiculous claim to say I was late.

"You were late. I was so hungry from waiting for you that I ended up having instant noodles."
"I ran back home today."
"But you were still late."

Miyagi is steadfast, seemingly having something she wants to impose through this penalty game. Yet, given that there was a reason for my rushed return, I am equally unwilling to concede.

If I get home at a time Miyagi considers early, she must do as I say.

We had such an agreement, and I intend for it to be honored.

“Then, let’s settle it with rock-paper-scissors.”

“Settle what?” Miyagi asks with a puzzled look.

“Whether I was early or not."

The judgment of whether I'm late or early is up to Miyagi. It depends on her mood, which means no matter how quickly I return, she might say it's late. But it’s not impossible to overturn her verdict of "late."

“If I win, let’s agree I was early.”

I just need to propose a condition she finds reasonable.

With the randomness of rock-paper-scissors, if I win, I hope she'll accept it. Besides, what I want her to do isn't something Miyagi would dislike.

“No.”

A short, clear refusal echoes back.

“Miyagi, I’ll throw rock.”

“Eh?”

“Here we go. Rock, paper, scissors!”

I override her with sheer momentum, and as I continue with “scissors,” Miyagi throws paper. My hand takes the shape of scissors, and the match is decided.

“Sendai-san, why did you throw scissors? You’re a liar.”

“I didn't lie. I meant to throw rock, but scissors came out instead.”

“That’s unfair.”

“Even if it’s unfair, a win is a win. Besides, I really did come back early, so just accept it.”

I nudge my foot against Miyagi’s, eliciting a disgruntled sound.

“…What do you want me to do?”

“Give me the last Sunday of this month. I’ll make the plans. Let’s go see penguins together. Last time we said ‘sometime,’ but didn’t set an actual date. I think we should settle that.”

I smile at Miyagi, but she only stares back with a serious expression, silent.

I don’t believe she’s forgotten the postponed promise to “go see penguins” due to the fever, nor do I think she’ll refuse, but without a verbal “let’s go,” there's a lingering unease. To avoid a refusal, I add, “It’s a promise, so let’s go.”

“…Okay, let’s go,” Miyagi mutters reluctantly.

No longer being roommates, I wish to renew the old promises made while we still were.

Today, that’s the promise I wanted to remake. Miyagi, who seems to have left her spirit somewhere, isn't smiling. Yet she is precisely who I want to see penguins with.

“Alright, shall we eat the pudding?”

I stand up and head toward the refrigerator.

Miyagi's Things and Mine (II)

Part 306

“I just can’t stop wondering.”

Mio’s somewhat loud voice came from next to me, accompanied by her piercing gaze.

It has been a little over a week since Miyagi left a mark on my neck.

The mark on my neck has long since disappeared, and I’m back to my normal self, but Mio’s memory hasn’t faded one bit.

“About what?”

I asked in a hushed tone only Mio would hear in the restless lecture room. She lowered her voice to match mine before replying.

“Who left the mark on Hazuki’s neck?”
“I told you, it was Miyagi.”

I stated the fact, flicking the pencil case on my desk with a finger. The pencil case was a Christmas gift from Miyagi with a black cat sprawled at the corner, reminiscent of her. I can’t help but touch it for no reason.

Even when I'm at university or tutoring, the urge to touch it never leaves me.

“I find that hard to believe.”
“If you think it's impossible, just give it up.”

I’m stating a fact, and I have no intention of naming anyone else. However, since Mio refuses to believe me, it’s pointless to repeat this conversation. Her question will never be satisfied.

I feel a mix of relief and disappointment about this.

“How about this then?”

Ignoring my suggestion to let it go, Mio looks at me with the eyes of a child who has just come up with a brilliant idea. Her eyes sparkled, but I only had a bad feeling.

“Can I come to your house?”

As expected, Mio voiced something troublesome.

“Isn’t that too sudden?”
“Well, it’s the kind of thing you spring on someone, right?”

“Maybe so, but I’m quite busy today.”
“You’re always busy, Hazuki. It doesn’t have to be today. Just ask Shiori-chan if I can visit sometime. I want to see her.”

My hand reflexively touched my blue earring when she mentioned “Shiori-chan.”

“You don’t need to come over just to see Miyagi.”

I tugged at my earlobe casually.

If I told Miyagi that Mio wanted to come over, she’d probably become grumpy. Even regardless of that, I don’t want Mio meeting her.

Mio might ask Miyagi unnecessary questions, another reason I’m reluctant to let her into the house.

“Shiori-chan might know who left the mark on your neck, so I’ll ask her.”

Her predictable words sent a pain to my temple.

If Mio were to ask such a question, Miyagi would surely lie. And Miyagi isn’t very good at lying.

While a scenario where Mio figures out the truth from Miyagi’s poorly told lie doesn’t necessarily bother me, I do think it best for Mio not to forcefully pry the truth from Miyagi.

“Miyagi isn't comfortable with relationship talk. I doubt she’d engage in that kind of conversation.”

Miyagi left a mark on my neck out in the open, yet she's quick to become irritable regardless of the consequences, and she would never want the truth coming from her own mouth.

I don't want to do what Miyagi doesn't desire.
I want to be the person Miyagi wants me to be.

"Come on, just tell me!"

Mio, who might be considered attractive if she stayed quiet, let out a voice that shattered the image.

"No need to ask Miyagi about the mark. It's not that big of a deal, anyway."
"But it is! We're talking about you, Hazuki. You're not exactly sociable. How can I not be curious about who you're with?"

"I could have been with a casual partner, you know?"

Even if it's just a hypothetical discussion, indulging in these topics brings me no joy. But I don't have a choice if I want to veer away from the direction of house visits.

"I considered that too."

"And?"

"The more I think about it, the more unclear it becomes. Even if it's a casual partner, who could it possibly be?"

"If you don't know, maybe it's time to give up."

"Noto-senpai told me the same thing."

"Noto-senpai?"

Given Mio and Noto-senpai's relationship, it wouldn't be strange if the senior heard about my situation. They're close enough that it's inevitable, and I haven't asked Mio to keep quiet about the mark on my neck. This development was bound to happen.

Still, I think today is just not a good day.

Everything coming out of Mio's mouth triggers a throb in my

temple; nothing interesting is said.

“When I talked about the mark and Shiori-chan with senpai, she told me to stop prying.”

I appreciate those wise words, but even if Mio stops probing, Noto-senpai is likely to start snooping, causing another sigh to well up inside me.

While Mio says troublesome things occasionally, Noto-senpai might well be three times as cumbersome.

“That’s all?”

I inquired, maintaining a neutral expression.

“That’s all.”
“Then follow Noto-senpai’s advice.”

Despite sensing potential future complications, I smiled lightly at Mio.

“Alright.”

Mio seemed to accept it, or half-heartedly so, then pleaded, "Show me that report from last time. I’ll treat you to lunch," while bowing before me. I agreed, and about five minutes later, the lecturer finally entered the room.

As the session began and listening to the lecturer’s voice, I touched my neck.

The mark was gone.
I brushed my fingers across the pencil case.
I can't see Miyagi, who isn’t at the same university.

I attended a few lectures, had lunch with Mio, and sat through more classes. Today, there's no work. After completing all the necessary university tasks, I head straight home.

Catching the train, navigating the sidewalk void of Mike-chan's presence, ascending three flights of stairs, and opening my front door—I find Miyagi’s shoes at the entrance.

Proceeding to the shared space, I don't find Miyagi herself.
I put my bag away in my room, and upon knocking on her door, it promptly opened.

"Welcome back."

Miyagi appeared, speaking in a voice neither too loud nor too soft.

"I'm home."

To my response, Miyagi cast her gaze downward.
But she soon lifted her eyes and called out, "Sendai-san."

"Hm?"

"...I want to go to the aquarium instead of the zoo."

Her voice, previously neutral, dropped noticeably, making it hard to catch, but it wasn't inaudible.

"The place to see penguins?"
"Yes."

Going to see penguins together.

Probably "going to see penguins" rather than "together" is what's significant here. Nonetheless, I'm delighted that Miyagi is excited enough to voice such a desire aloud.

Is it the same as last time?
Should we go somewhere else?
Should we head out early and hit the zoo too?

All sorts of questions swirl in my mind to ask Miyagi, but before I can voice them, she presses a palm gently against my stomach.

"Sendai-san, cook us dinner."

Miyagi pushes me along as she exits into the shared space assertively. I'm steered by her to the front of the fridge.

Apparently, she doesn't want to follow-up the penguin discussion for now.

This leaves me with only one thing to say, and I voice it.

“Anything you want to eat?”
“Anything is fine.”

Her unceremonious tone met my ears as I opened the fridge.

There was a decent assortment of contents in the fridge, including meat and vegetables. While I could opt for something from the freezer that just needed the microwave, I decided instead to whip up some ginger pork with eggplants and a Chinese-style salad with bean sprouts and cucumbers.

I grabbed a frying pan and a knife.

As I sliced the eggplants, I instructed Miyagi on how to prepare the Chinese salad while frying the pork. Once the meat was cooked, I added the eggplants, seasoning them with ginger and other spices.

Meanwhile, Miyagi was slicing cucumbers into pieces that couldn’t quite be called “thin,” and combined them with bean sprouts heated in the microwave.

“I put in too much soy sauce.”

Miyagi said, sounding unsure despite having measured the soy sauce with a spoon, a crease forming on her brow.

“It’s fine. I'll handle the plating, so please take care of the rice.”

Miyagi nodded in agreement and fetched some dishware. Once I plated the ginger pork and the salad and carried them to the table, chopsticks were already set out.

My seat didn't feel like my seat today.

Noticing the slight strangeness on the table, I sat in Miyagi's chair instead.

“Sendai-san, sit in your own chair.”

Miyagi brought over the rice with a voice dripping with annoyance.

“Aren’t we switching seats?”

“Why would we?”

“Because the chopstick rests—”

On the table were chopstick rests modeled after a black cat and a calico cat. They were placed differently than usual, with my spot having Miyagi’s black cat and her spot having my calico cat.

So naturally, I sat where my chopstick rest was.

Yet Miyagi was strangely displeased and cut me off, insisting, “Sit where you usually do.”

There was no point—and no need—in defying her, so I quietly complied with Miyagi’s request, and she, too, sat in her "usual place."

“I made it match the pencil case I gave you, Sendai-san. ...But if you prefer the calico, I can switch them back.”

The day we updated our plans to visit the penguins, Miyagi used the calico chopstick rest. But that was the only time; she never used the calico rest again. Still, I figured she could use mine if she wanted.

So, there was no need to switch them back.

I wanted to see Miyagi using my things, and I hoped she'd want to see me using hers.

I thought today wasn’t going well, but I no longer felt that way.

“The black cat is fine.”

A memory of exchanging blouses and neckties back in high school came to mind.

Miyagi likes exchanges, I believe.

I gazed at her and spoke.

“Cute.”

Miyagi is.

More than anyone else.

“The chopstick rests?”

“Well, something like that. Let’s eat.”

With that, we said “Let's eat” at the same time.

Chapter 107

Sendai-san Isn't the Same (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 307

I feel like today's Sendai-san isn't the best version of herself. Her gaze is directed at a guidebook, using the bed as a backrest.

"Miyagi, are you listening?"

Sendai-san speaks without lifting her face from the book filled with fish. Her eyes never meet mine.

"…I'm listening."

I squish the head of the penguin plushie beside me. But the plushie, brought by Sendai-san from her room, doesn't complain. It just sits quietly between us, remaining silent.

"Which aquarium should we go to?"
"Anywhere is fine. Since you said you'd make the plans, Sendai-san, you should decide everything."

"Can I come to your room later?"

Sendai-san suddenly said that over dinner, and soon after she got out of the bath, she came to my room with the penguin plushie and a guidebook for aquariums.

I thought she came to inform me of tomorrow's destination. Instead, she opened up the guidebook, wanting to discuss the aquarium visit, bringing us to the present moment.

But I don't think there's any need to ask for my opinion. It was Sendai-san who kept renewing our promise to go see penguins together, and she chose the day as well. Since she said she'd make the plans, she ought to decide on the destination too.

"I went through the trouble of buying a book."
"I didn't ask you to buy it."

When I tried different searches on my phone about aquariums with penguins during the holidays, I was unsure where exactly would be best to visit.

But I only cared about seeing penguins, so there was no need for such worry.

That holds true now as well.

As long as the aquarium has penguins, that is enough. There's no need to go out and buy a guidebook just to pick a place.

I don't want to use a guidebook for my promise with Sendai-san anyway.

"Is anywhere really fine?"

Sendai-san finally lifts her gaze from the guidebook to look at me. Our eyes meet for the first time today, and as I pull on the penguin's hand, I respond with "It is."

"Really?"
"You're being persistent, I already said it's fine."

Summer vacation, winter vacation, spring vacation.
The promises my father made about taking me somewhere would always be abandoned in favor of work.

To be precise, shortly after my mother left, he did keep his promises sometimes. But those incidents gradually became commonplace, until "special promises" were no longer made at all.

Carefully crafted plans never came to fruition; I don't remember seeing any benefit in the guidebooks my father bought.

Guidebooks aren't good things.

Promises exist to be broken, hopes exist to be dashed.

I now recall all those thoughts.

"Then, how about you just close your eyes and pick the aquarium on whichever page you flip to?"

Sendai-san suggests with an air of ingenuity, and I toss the penguin at her.

"Hey, Miyagi, don’t throw Pen-chan. That's mean."

Holding the caught plushie, Sendai-san protests, displeased.

"I find that randomness annoying."
"Then join in the discussion. At least suggest some potential spots you'd like to go to."
"I have no suggestions."
"How about this—let's do rock-paper-scissors? If I win, you have to pick a place you want to go."

After placing the penguin on the floor, Sendai-san gives me a bright smile.

"I won’t do it. You cheat at rock-paper-scissors."

I can't trust playing rock-paper-scissors with Sendai-san. Even when she says she'll play rock and I choose paper, she switches to scissors.

Promises should be kept.

Though sometimes being with Sendai-san makes me believe they will be, I also know there are times that they aren't.

There is no "absolute" in this world. While it's possible to approach it, nothing absolutely exists, not even my contradictory thoughts.

"I don't think I cheat, though."

Her nonchalant voice reaches me, and I immediately reject it with a firm "you do."

"Well, it's fine. I made a promise to plan the trip, so I'll decide myself."

With that, she lowers her gaze again to the guidebook.

Another page is turned to reveal penguins. Again a page is turned to

reveal seals. Pages continue to turn endlessly. As blurry fish swim across the pages, the guidebook consumes the gaze that was looking at me.

"Sendai-san."

I tap the penguin's head as I call out to her.

"Have you found a place you want to go?"

Still without looking up, Sendai-san responds, "No."

Boring.
This kind of Sendai-san is really boring.

I don't exactly want an intense discussion about choosing a destination, but all this relentless flipping through a guidebook is uninteresting. She hasn't lifted her eyes from the light blue pages, making it seem as if she doesn't care about me at all.

It's as if, even though I'm here, I'm not seen—it feels the same as not being here at all, making my presence meaningless. It's no different from being alone in my room.

I stretch my hand towards Sendai-san's neck, touching it softly with my fingertips. Slowly, I glide my fingers across her soft skin and firmly press against her collarbone.

"Miyagi. You do know we're going out tomorrow, right?"

Sendai-san looks up from the guidebook to meet my gaze.

"Yeah, I know. What about it?"
"If you leave a mark, it'll be troublesome."

She clasps my hand.

"I won’t leave any. I’m just touching. Let go."

I have the right to leave as many marks on Sendai-san as I wish.

She belongs only to me, so I can mark her as much as I like to show she's mine.

There’s no room for refusal.

But today, I don’t feel like leaving marks. I just want her to look at me.

"Sendai-san."

When I call her name, the hand that held mine lets go. I place the penguin on the bed and inch closer to her. Again, I press my hand against her neck and stroke her throat. A soft voice calling "Miyagi" reaches my ears as I gently settle my teeth against her neck.

Freshly out of the bath, she smells just like me.
Her body is warm, and it makes mine feel just as heated.

Wanting to feel more of her warmth, I lift her shirt and press my palm against her side, causing her body to tremble slightly.

I lift my face from her neck and look at her.

"Why did you flinch?"

When I question her, her eyes, which had been trained on me, start to drift towards the guidebook, prompting me to press my hand firmly against her side.

"…I thought you were going to do something like that."

I hear her vague, mumbled reply.

"What do you mean 'something like that'?"
"Something like that is something like that."

I understand what Sendai-san is trying to say.
But at times like this, she usually says it more definitively.

There’s something off.

I sense that, but my curiosity makes me want to see where this version of Sendai-san will go, so I stroke her side upwards.

"Miyagi. Do you want to do something like that?"

I hear the words that aim to avoid clarifying again, and I let my

hand wander under her chest.

Through my palm, I feel how tense her body has become.

Just a little higher.
That's where my hand should be.

I've touched there before.
And even now, if I wanted to, I could touch it.

With a thud, my heart pounds.

I exhale softly, and when I move my fingers slightly, our locked gaze breaks apart, leaving me unsure of what to do.

"Miyagi."

She calls my name firmly, and I let go.
Putting the distance of a single penguin between us, I grab the guidebook she was holding and flip it open.

"What about continuing?"

To her question, I respond with "Not doing it," and turn the pages.

"If you don't feel that way, then don't touch me like that."
"I don't get your meaning."
"You understand perfectly well."

Sendai-san takes the guidebook from me and places it on the table. But she doesn't say anything further. Suddenly, the room is silent, and even though it's my space, it feels uncomfortable.

"…Is Mio-san doing well?"

Unsure of what to say to banish the oppressive silence, fragments of what's been on my mind finally spill out.

"She's doing well."
"I see."
"Is that all?"

What I really want to ask about is Noto-san.
I've been worried about whether she's said anything to Sendai-san.

However, since Sendai-san hasn't mentioned Noto-san at all, I assume she doesn’t know that I met Noto-san at Maika's workplace. If she knew, she’d definitely ask me something.

Yet, I can’t get Noto-san out of my mind. If I suddenly bring up her name, it might seem strange to Sendai-san, so all I can do is brood over it.

"Is Mio-san still working at the café?"

I continue the conversation that seems both relevant and irrelevant.

"Sometimes. Are you interested in working?"
"I’m not."
"I know."

Sendai-san’s voice carries a resigned tone, and once more, the room falls silent. But this time, Sendai-san quickly chases the silence away.

"Is it okay if we go to the same aquarium we visited last time?"
"Yeah."
"Can I kiss you?"

Sendai-san adds it like an attachment to the topic of the aquarium.

"No."
"Why not?"
"Just because."

With those words, I drag the penguin down from the bed and hug it tightly.

Sendai-san Isn't the Same (II)

Part 308

Yesterday, Sendai-san took the guidebook back to her room with her. However, she left the penguin here insisting, "Take care of this," so it remained, now looking at my skirt from the bed.

"You could at least offer some advice," I mutter, sitting on the bed and giving the penguin's head a light tap.

The skirt lay beside it. I'm debating whether or not to wear it.

Despite it being a Sunday, my mood is cloudy. The reason is simple: I can't decide what to wear to the aquarium today. Plus, the penguin remains frustratingly silent.

After spending all that time in Sendai-san's room, observing her, you'd think it'd have some tips. But no, the penguin is utterly useless, staring wordlessly at my dilemma.

"I shouldn't have bought it," I scowl at the skirt.

I didn't purchase it specifically for today. I bought it on a shopping trip with Maika. My closet contains skirts selected by Sendai-san, along with other outfits. Still, I found myself wanting something new.

I could simply wear it since I bought it. But if I wear brand-new clothes, it might feel like I bought them just for today's outing to see the penguins with Sendai-san, and that bothers me.

What should I do?

The penguin is of no help, and my brain isn't working either. On days like this, I can't quickly decide what to wear.

I think it's ridiculous to worry about this.

It's not as if Sendai-san cares about what I wear.

I sigh deeply.

School uniforms are great, I think. They spare you the hassle of choosing an outfit.

And come to think of it, school uniforms are skirts too.

I tug at the hem of the new skirt lying on the bed.

Since graduating, skirts have been a rarity in my wardrobe. Not that I dislike them; wearing a skirt every now and then is fine. But it's just that I never proactively chose to wear them.

So, picking one for today feels like a special occasion, making it hard to decide.

I'm overthinking this.

I decide to wear the skirt on the bed, standing up to pull a shirt from my closet.

Once dressed, I glance in the mirror. The newly purchased skirt doesn't seem to suit me, and the realization dampens my spirits.

Thoughts of Sendai-san arise. "Since you went to the trouble of wearing a skirt, you might as well do your makeup," is something she might say, further worsening my mood.

But she might have a point.

Even if makeup doesn't drastically change how the ill-fitting skirt looks, it might be better than doing nothing.

However, I'm not confident in my ability to do it well.

So then, I would have to rely on Sendai-san, which prompts a new sigh.

I don't want to go.

I want to see the penguins, but I can't muster a positive attitude.

Maybe a headache or a cold.

I consider making up an excuse to retreat to my room. But if I mention feeling unwell, Sendai-san will make a big fuss, complicating my life further.

I clutch the penguin and leave my room, walking around the shared space before stopping at Sendai-san's door.

Inhale, exhale, inhale.
I hold my breath, and reach for the door—

But I exhale without knocking.

I don't have to ask for help with my makeup.. I don't really need it.

Right now, I'm standing in front of her room for a different reason.

Resolutely, I knock twice on the door loudly.

Hurried footsteps approach, and the door swings open, revealing Sendai-san's flustered face. "Is something wrong?" she asks, peering out. Despite being in a mundane skirt-and-top combo, she looks stunning, like she's wearing something special. I divert my eyes.

"I'm returning the penguin."

As I try to hand over the plush toy and retreat, she grabs my arm.

"Is that all? Are you sure nothing's wrong?"
"There's nothing."
"You pounded on the door, so I wondered if something happened."
"It wasn't that hard."

I try to brush off the situation and pull my arm free, but her grip remains firm.

"Did you buy that skirt recently? I don't recognize it."

Sendai-san notices things she doesn't need to notice.

"It was in my closet."
"It suits you," she says softly, smiling, pulling my arm.

"I was just about to call you. Good timing. Come in."
"Call me? For what?"

"I thought I'd dress you up and do your makeup. But since you're already dressed, we can just focus on the makeup."
"What if I refuse?"
"You're already here. You might as well let me do your makeup."
"What do you mean 'might as well'?"
"Well, you don’t have to, but wouldn’t it make it feel more like an outing?"

Her reasoning makes me hesitate. Despite not having dressed up or done makeup much lately, she hasn't forgotten about those habits.

Aquariums, school festivals, and more.

Tracing back through my memories, I remember how persistent Sendai-san could be when it came to dress-up and makeup occasions. I hadn’t planned to ask her for help, but the truth is, I wanted to, and she pulls me into her room.

"Sit here,"

Sendai-san instructs, tossing the penguin onto the bed.

"I never said you could do my makeup."
"Just say yes."

Her voice is cheerful, but there's no room for refusal. Makeup tools are spread across the table, and I resign to sitting on the floor.

"I don't want this to take forever,"

I complain, to which Sendai-san cheerfully replies, "Got it," pinning my bangs back with a clip. She then gazes at me earnestly.

It's somehow uncomfortable. The applying of foundation and base feels strange.

I don't know where to look, so my eyes fall to her neckline.

"That…"

I speak involuntarily.

"You remember?"

There's something on her neckline that I couldn’t possibly forget.

"Of course. You didn’t throw it away."

On the day of our high school graduation.

I almost reclaimed it from Sendai-san, but ended up exchanging it for the key to this room.

A silver necklace adorned with a small moon charm.

Now tucked beneath her clothes, only the chain is visible, but she’s wearing it.

"I didn't throw it away," Sendai-san pauses her hands, meeting my gaze.

"Why now?"
"I thought it would make it clear I'm yours."
"Even without that, you're already mine. A simple mark would do. Shall I mark you now?"
"A mark would work, but it might attract attention at the aquarium. It'd be troublesome at university as well. No one would believe me if I said Miyagi gave it to me."

Sendai-san replies in a tone that leaves me unsure whether she's serious or joking.

"...I mean, a necklace is fine, but if you choose something more stylish, that could serve as the mark instead."

"If you want a new one, then pick it yourself, Miyagi. It wouldn’t feel like it’s yours if I choose it," she responded.

"I find it hard to choose and I don't want to," I replied.

Even though Sendai-san looks good in anything, I feel like anything I choose would diminish her appearance. I remember struggling to pick earrings for her. For her to remain beautiful, she should wear things not chosen by me.

The earrings I chose did suit her, but surely there are better choices for her—same with the necklace.

I believe there is a necklace more fitting than the one she's wearing, but I'm not the right person to choose it.

"Difficult in what way?" she asks.

"...I'm just bad at choosing for others."

"Then let's go look for it together."

I could refuse, but it'd be futile.

If I do, she'll bring it up again, urging me to choose a necklace.

"...I'll think about it," I reluctantly reply despite knowing it's inevitable. The closer my bond with Sendai-san, the harder it is to pick something for her.

"I'll be waiting," she says gently, continuing with, "Miyagi."

"Did you choose that skirt yourself?" she inquires.

"Does it matter? Just get on with it," I retort, irritated at her stopping.

It's none of Sendai-san's concern or business who picked my skirt.

"Why can't we chat a bit? If it's not you who chose it, was it Utsunomiya?"

"I bought it when I went out with Maika."

Upon hearing the truth, she surprisingly knits her brows.

"I see."

Her slightly lower tone scrapes against my eardrums, making my stomach clench.

"I'd like to choose your clothes again," she softly but sharply suggests.

Her gentle tone has a piercing edge that stings me. Unsure of how to respond, I mutter, "If I feel like it," prompting her to resume her halted actions.

"I just need to put on some lip color. Close your eyes," she instructs.

Sendai-san, who finished my makeup swiftly, unclips my bangs, and her fingers graze my lips.

"Why do I have to close my eyes?"

"It's hard to apply otherwise," she says seriously, prompting me to obediently shut my eyes.

Her fingers leave my lips, replaced by something softer, unmistakably her lips, warm against mine.

When I grab her shoulder, her lips press more forcefully.

I didn't say she could kiss me.

Yet, that doesn't mean I don't want it.

Unable to push her shoulder away, her tongue slips between my parted lips. A mere brush turns into a deeper kiss, shared warmth blending between us.

The warmth from Sendai-san is comforting.

She enters me naturally, merging.

Our tongues brush, intertwine.

It fits naturally, making me want to stay like this indefinitely. But there are plans today that cannot be disrupted. A promise ought to be kept, so I push against her shoulder.

"Isn't it weird to kiss now? It has nothing to do with makeup," I voice my complaint about the unexpected act.

"It does," she responds, unfazed.

"In what way?"

"It raises my spirits."

"You're ridiculous. That's enough," I retort.

Sendai-san, despite her intelligence, spouts ridiculous things when she's with me.

"My apologies. I'll be serious now."

Whether she's genuinely repentant is unclear, but she applies the lip color, shows me my face in a mirror, and comments, "You look cute."

"Thank you."

I lack a reply to being called "cute," but I can express gratitude.

"You're welcome," she smiles, tidying the table before standing up.

"Shall we go then?" she suggests, acting as if nothing happened. Despite her pristine outfit, her actions contradict its elegance, further irking me.

"Sendai-san," I call out.

"Yes?"

"...It suits you," I say.

I don't specify what, but she understands, her voice bright.

"Thanks."

Sendai-san beams with a delighted smile.

Her smile is beautiful, annoyingly flawless.

So, slowly, I stand up and step on her foot.

Sendai-san Isn't the Same (III)

Part 309

Boarding the train, then disembarking. Now, I'm simply walking beside Sendai-san. After all, there's no reason for me to walk anywhere else but next to her.

Even if we both know the destination, it would be strange for two people to walk five or six steps ahead or behind one another.

We're not exactly having an interesting conversation, but it seems perfectly reasonable to match our pace and walk together.

But, I have a complaint.

"Sendai-san, you're a pervert."

"What’s up with that all of a sudden? Isn’t that a bit much?"

Sendai-san lifts her gaze and looks at me.

"If you don’t want to be called out, stop staring at my skirt."

It's not constant, but I often feel her gaze. If we were at home, I'd probably step on her foot hard or kick her, but since we're outside, I am refraining from doing so.

"Last time we went to the aquarium, you wore a skirt too. I was just thinking it reminded me of that day."

Today’s destination is the aquarium, the same aquarium we visited before.

The destination is the same. The situation is similar. Yet, today and that day are not identical.

It was summer then, but today, the weather is too ambiguous to call it spring, and it's too soon to call it summer. And though I'm wearing a skirt like that day, it’s not the same.

“Back then, you brought the skirt over without me even asking.”

Today and that day don't overlap. Though I'm starting to regret choosing this skirt due to Sendai-san's gaze, it's fine.

At the end of May, under a ridiculously blue sky, it’s not strange to wear a skirt. Today, I must wear a skirt.

"Anyway, you’re forbidden from look at my skirt. Keep your eyes ahead, Sendai-san."

“It suits you, so it's fine if I look a bit more, right?”

“There’s no need to look.”

I think Sendai-san should focus on no one else but me, but today, being looked at makes me uneasy.

Wearing a skirt that I don’t usually wear makes me feel like I’m walking on clouds, uneasy and unsure. Being stared at too much might make it hard for me to look at Sendai-san myself.

"Miyagi, you're stingy."

"I'm fine being stingy."

I push Sendai-san’s arm gently. We create a slight distance between us, and she directs her gaze forward.

This skirt is merely a small token of apology.

We had planned to see the penguins during the break, but because I caught a cold, our plans fell through.

On top of that, Sendai-san ended up taking care of me and planning the outing that I should have planned.

I left everything, everything, to Sendai-san.

So today, before Sendai-san, who often insists on making me wear skirts, could say anything, I put on a skirt. A feeble act to reduce my guilt, only I hadn’t expected her to stare so much.

The skirt I'm wearing, something I happened to buy on a whim,

should have been chosen from what was already in my closet.

If it had been one she'd seen before, I bet I wouldn't have felt her gaze as much.

“Hey, Miyagi.”

Sendai-san softly calls to me, walking as if retracing the past summer.

“Do you hate it when I choose your clothes?”

Her gaze isn't on me. She's respecting my earlier request of “keep your eyes forward.”

“Why are you asking that now?”

“Because I want to pick out clothes for you again."

"...And what if I say I don't like it?"

I didn't speak that quietly, but my voice seemed like it might be swallowed by the crowd.

It's a seemingly ordinary Sunday morning, not a summer vacation nor a holiday, yet there are so many people converging towards the aquarium.

"If you're genuinely against it, I'll give up."

"Well, decide for yourself whether I'm serious or not."

"What happens if I judge wrong?"

"I won't forgive mistakes."

"Miyagi's requests always come with a high difficulty level, huh.”

With a theatrically exaggerated sigh, Sendai-san looks at me.

Though the crowd clings to the path to the aquarium, she stands out as if hovering above it.

For some reason, Sendai-san never gets lost in a crowd.

"Face forward," I tell her coldly.

"Okay, okay," she replies.

Walking in silence as the conversation lulls, we eventually reach the elevator that takes us to the aquarium.

We're pushed in by others and step into the elevator. Like clockwork, as soon as it reaches the top, people get off, including us. Just like during summer vacation, we line up, not with the five thousand yen that once connected two high school girls, but with money from our own wallets to buy tickets.

A day that is similar yet different progresses, leading us into the aquarium.

The sight that greets us hasn't changed much. The interior spreads out like a deep-sea world steeped in a blue hue reminiscent of that day.

No matter how crowded it is, Sendai-san remains faithfully by my side. She doesn’t get lost in the sea of people.

"Would you prefer sticking to the path?" Sendai-san asks, glancing at a pamphlet.

"I want to see the penguins first."

"What about everything else?"

"Later."

Today’s promise is to see the penguins, not just any fish. Therefore, the penguins come first.

Promises can be broken, but not this one today.

Visiting an aquarium only to leave without seeing a penguin would not do. That's absolutely unacceptable.

Prioritizing anything other than penguins is not an option.

"Okay, then after we see the penguins, we can decide what to check

out next."

With those words, Sendai-san starts walking. I walk beside her, heading towards where the penguins are.

There’s no hesitation. I know where the penguins are located.

We move at a reasonable pace, passing people glued to the tanks with sharks and rays.

She had told me about not having a boyfriend, about the person she likes.

The fact that I had asked Sendai-san such a silly question here drifts through my mind, speeding up my walking pace.

“Oh, Miyagi, can I take a picture?”

Sendai-san catches my arm, asking.

“No.”

My answer is firm. But, she doesn't release her hold. Our pace slows.

“Please, let’s take a picture.”

With an upbeat voice, she releases my arm and pulls out her phone, aiming it at me.

In front of the tank, I stop walking.

A dry click resounds, capturing my image on her phone.

“I didn't say you could take one.”

My brow furrows instinctively.

“Then why don’t you take one too? When we reach the penguins.”

Sendai-san resumes walking. As her skirt, different from the one she wore in the summer, sways, I retrieve my phone from my bag and aim it at her as she walks.

Click.

I snap a photo of Sendai-san three steps ahead before moving to walk beside her.

"Miyagi, if you're going to take pictures of people instead of penguins, let's take one together," Sendai-san said, looking at me with a dissatisfied expression.

"No."

I repeated what I'd said moments ago and quickened my pace. I couldn't afford to spend time taking pictures.

Hurry, hurry. To ensure the promise isn't broken.

I rushed toward where the penguins were.

Sendai-san Isn't the Same (IV)

Part 310

We climb the stairs, heading upward.
After passing by a tank reminiscent of a jungle, the seals come into view.

My memory does not fail me.

The seals that Sendai-san and I admired the last time we were here are adorable today as well. However, unlike that day, there's no leisurely watching them today. It's not that I dislike seals or don't want to see them, but I briskly walk past.

I know there's no need to hurry.

The penguins won't suddenly disappear, and neither will Sendai-san. Following the aquarium's path will inevitably lead to the penguins, and Sendai-san should be by my side all along.

There's plenty of time.

No matter how leisurely we explore the aquarium, our promise will be kept, so there's no need to rush. Even thinking this way, I can't help but prioritize seeing the penguins.

It seems strange to be so captivated by a promise.

I slow my pace and glance to my side.
Sendai-san walks next to me, just like last time.

Her smartphone is back in her bag, and she's not focused elsewhere. Instead, she smiles at me and comments, "The seals were cute," to which I reply, "They really were."

During summer break at this aquarium, when I unwisely asked if she had someone she liked, she responded with "Mike-chan." But today, she doesn't bring up Mike-chan at all.

Today is clearly different from the last time.

Even though it's the same location with the same person, it's not the same day.

Fragments of memories scattered everywhere vividly remind me of today, making me realize that today, too, will eventually transform into a memory.

Things we talked about and saw on that day.

Just like that, the things we talk about and see today will also change into memory fragments and sink into this place resembling the bottom of the ocean.

But it’s not a bad thing.

I want the blue-tinged memories we created in this aquarium to remain here, like the earrings I gifted to Sendai-san. I don't necessarily want to talk about Mike-chan or talk about who we like, but it's nice to occasionally pull those memory fragments from the shelf and gaze at them.

"Miyagi, is it alright if we head straight to the penguins?"

With Sendai-san's gentle voice, I respond with "Sure," and step outside to the open-air area.
My feet automatically bypass the sea lions and otters.

Soon, I spot penguins walking as if flying over the grass.

Yet, today, those aren’t the penguins I want to see.
Since we came this far, I wish to go just a bit further.

"Miyagi, aren't we going to look at these penguins?"

With a gentle tug on my arm from Sendai-san, I come to a halt.
I point to a bit further ahead.

"I want to see the penguins over there first."
"Then let’s come back and see these ones later."

With a cheerful voice, Sendai-san agrees and releases my arm.
We start walking again, heading towards the location where we saw the flying penguins during summer break.

Penguins are adorable; naturally, I want to see them if they are there. However, they're not something I must prioritize over all the other creatures in the aquarium.

Both the penguins on the grass and the ones that seem to fly through the sky are just penguins, and either way, our promise will still be fulfilled.

Still.
I want to see the flying penguins.

Just as Sendai-san showed me that day, I want to gaze up at the penguins from below.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san calls to me, halting her steps.
I too stop walking.
I lift my gaze and see a tank overhead reflecting the blue of the sky.

Though it's not as hot at the end of May as it was during summer break, this place remains unchanged.

"The penguins are flying today too."

Her soft voice reaches me from my side.
As sunlight pierces through the tank, it creates a sparkling shadow at our feet, illuminating Sendai-san with a brilliance that feels almost blinding.

Voices calling for mothers, friends chatting casually.
Trivial conversations.
Various sounds flow in with the wind.

The scenery is visible, too.
Buildings stand tall, with grass and trees swaying.
The sky is blue, and the clouds are white.

Yet, even though I can see and hear, I remain unfocused.
These things seem irrelevant now.

All my attention is directed towards Sendai-san.

"Miyagi, are you watching?"

Despite the surrounding noise, Sendai-san's voice reaches me clearly. My vision, embraced by blue skies and water, leads the promised penguins far away, leaving only Sendai-san in focus.

"Miyagi?"

Meeting Sendai-san's gaze, she calls out to me.
The penguins are in the sky.
They're not between us.

"Sendai-san, why are you looking this way?"
"You too, Miyagi..."

Her sentence trails off, dissolving into the light descending from the tank.
Our gazes remain locked, and my vision sparkles.

"What about me?"

When I ask, Sendai-san smiles softly.

"Nothing. Let's look at the penguins."
"I am looking."
"Then, look more closely."

As she says this, Sendai-san moves behind me.
Placing her hands on my shoulders, she whispers "See?" into my ear.

But I can't move.

She taps my shoulder, prompting me to lift my gaze.
The penguins blur into the sky's blue.
I hear Sendai-san's voice from behind.

"Miyagi, aren't the penguins cute?"
"Yeah."

Black and white creatures flow above my head.

"…Sendai-san."
"What?"
"Thank you for keeping your promise."

The guidebook my father looked at but would only plan with.

Even though Sendai-san sometimes broke her promises, she looked at that guidebook too, and the plan didn't end with just planning.

Until now, whenever a special promise was made, seeds of doubt sprouted, grew tall, and ensnared me. Doubts I wished to crush flourished, becoming tendrils that bound my heart, incapacitating me from moving forward.

The more I wanted to believe, the more anxious I became, and I simply couldn't stop doubting.

Of course, even now, there are times when I have doubts.
When a promise is made, I worry about whether it will be kept.

Yet today, I feel like it might be okay to make a special promise, even if it might not be kept.

"Those are my words. Thank you, Miyagi, for keeping your promise too."

Though I can't see her face, her voice, softer than the clouds, is clear.

"The penguins are truly adorable."

With a voice as warm as sunlight, Sendai-san remarks, and the blurred penguins take shape.
The creatures, resembling black-and-white rockets, swim overhead.

They really are cute.

This is where we needed to come to see the penguins.

Certainly, I'll recall today repeatedly in the future.
And I'll remember the first time we came here as well.

That's why I want to see the flying penguins with Sendai-san again.
That's what I thought.

Chapter 108

Miyagi's Other Side (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 311

I was taken aback. Miyagi was utterly unexpected. Instead of the blue sky or the black and white penguins, I looked at Miyagi's black hair.

I should have stood next to her instead of behind her.

With no small amount of regret, I gently moved the hand I'd placed on her shoulder, reaching to touch the tips of her hair.

I wish she had kept looking at me forever.
That's what I thought.

Yet, in this place, I wanted her to look at the penguins.
That's how I felt.

If Miyagi could see both me and the penguins at the same time, I could maybe fulfill both desires, but a person's attention always leans one way. She would naturally focus on either me or the penguins; it's impossible to equally regard both.

So, I made a choice.

I lifted my gaze to the penguins. They were cute, but knowing they monopolized Miyagi's gaze was irritating.

Although it was my choice, I didn't want to hand the gaze solely meant for me over to the penguins.

If I could, I'd wish for Miyagi to always have eyes only for me. She need not look at anything else. I belong entirely to Miyagi, and so Miyagi should attentively observe and keep track of where and what her belonging is doing.

Despite this line of thought, there was a reason I yielded to the penguins.

Last summer vacation.
I wanted to see Miyagi smiling again at the flying penguins.

To make that wish come true, we came to this place.

——But it wasn't to be.

From my position, I can't see Miyagi's face. Yet, I don't need her to look at me now since I hope she smiles at the penguins just like she did back then. I wish those frequent sullen expressions she holds in front of me could be replaced by smiles.

I hope that one day she will laugh even if there are no penguins around, laugh even if we're not in this place, and laugh in front of me while looking at me.

I place a bit more pressure on the hand on Miyagi's shoulder.
I shift my gaze from the penguins to her black hair.

There are times like this when I wish I could simply hold her.

Maybe, if I could feel with my entire body that she is, indeed, smiling, the regret of giving her gaze to the penguins might just fade away.

But, it's not something Miyagi would allow in a place like this.

I withdraw my hand from feeling her warmth. At the very least, I want to preserve today’s version of Miyagi.

Even if it's just for a few seconds.

I take out my smartphone and step back three paces.
Then I call out, to steal Miyagi’s gaze from the penguins—

“Miyagi.”

“What?” she says, turning around.
With a click, I capture a photo of Miyagi with my phone.

She isn't smiling. But her expression is softer than usual.

Just a bit, she seems happier here than anywhere else.

“Miyagi.”

Though there’s nothing more to say, I can’t help but utter her name.

Miyagi says nothing.

Like before, she fixes her gaze intently on me.
Like before, my heart drums noisily.

Just by being looked at by Miyagi, I lose all sense of where I am, able to think of nothing but her. I want to abandon everything and reach out to her.

I grasp the pendant over my clothes, one that bound me during my high school days.

More than back then, I feel infinitely more bound to Miyagi now. Even wearing a pendant declaring me as hers, I need her so much that it isn’t enough.

Feeling like I might break, I take another photo of Miyagi.
Miyagi says nothing. Normally, she'd sulk, but right now she doesn't.

“Sendai-san, look at the penguins.”

A soft voice devoid of thorns reaches me.

“I am.”

I respond with words that neither seek to correct nor clarify. For me, the penguins are secondary. It’s Miyagi who should be looking at them, and I’m here to look at that Miyagi.

“Then, take some pictures.”

My body moves by itself at Miyagi’s words.
I click the shutter and capture Miyagi within my phone.

“Not me. The penguins.”

Her voice comes a bit lower.

“For what?”

I click the shutter again.
Though she looks a bit grumpier than in the previous shots, she's cute.

Maybe I should have styled her hair in braids or ties. Even as she is, she's cute, but perhaps a different hairstyle would have suited the skirt Utsunomiya might have chosen. Ultimately, Miyagi should have let me pick the skirt.

“I want to look at the penguins later, so take some pictures.”

Miyagi replies while still looking at me.

“If you want to see them, look now, right here.”
“…Never mind, I'll look at the other penguins.”

Saying this, she starts walking without looking at me.
Without needing to think, “other penguins” refers to those over in the area designed to resemble a grassland, and I follow, walking beside her.

There's no conversation.
We walk in silence.

The destination isn't far, so we arrive shortly, and Miyagi’s gaze shifts to the penguins. There are no opportunities for me to steal her gaze.

“Can I take more pictures?”

I ask this standing beside Miyagi who doesn’t look at me.

"...Pictures of what?"
“Of you, Miyagi.”
“I already told you, take pictures of the penguins. I want to see them later.”
"Won't you take any yourself?"
“…I will.”

With those words, she takes her phone out from her bag and points it at me for some reason. However, she doesn't take a photo, only furrows her brow.

“I want to see the penguins you photographed too, Sendai-san, so take some shots.”
“Okay.”

Even though what I want to photograph is only Miyagi, when asked, I can’t refuse. Reluctantly, I point my smartphone toward the penguins.

Click.

Before I could even take the picture, I hear the sound of a shutter.

Looking toward the sound, I find Miyagi’s phone pointed downward.

I don’t know what she captured. It likely wasn’t the ground, so I hope it’s me the phone captured.

“Sendai-san, properly take some pictures.”

Her displeased voice orders me, and I redirect my phone back at the penguins.

What I want to see and capture is right beside me.

Right now, what I’m required to do is look at the penguins and photograph them, so I can’t look at or capture Miyagi.

It’s a frustrating task for me, one I never imagined I’d find myself resenting.

In the days I fantasized about a college life with Miyagi beside me, as a high school senior, I thought about how great it’d be but never truly believed such a future awaited.

Time has passed since then, and Miyagi is beside me.

I’d feel content if just having her by my side was enough, but I can’t stop myself from longing for more.

“Miyagi, remember when we talked about sea lions and seals?”

I mechanically focus my body toward the penguins while directing the smartphone at them, though I want to look at Miyagi.

“I remember. The talk about their ear flaps, right?”
“Yes.”

The day we came to the aquarium, back home, we chatted about the difference between sea lions and seals, specifically the “auricles,” which were akin to earlobes.

“Let’s go see the ears.”

Stopping my photography, I turn toward Miyagi.

“We saw them at the zoo.”

Indeed, she was right; we confirmed at the zoo that sea lions had something akin to ears, but it's not as if you're only allowed to see auricles once in your life.

"Let's look at them at the aquarium too."

Without waiting for a response, I tugged at Miyagi's arm. We still had time.

I wanted to capture as many pictures of Miyagi enjoying herself as possible, even if it meant filling up my phone’s storage. That's why I set off, making sure that she wouldn’t have the chance to say something like, "We’ve seen the penguins, so we should go home."

Miyagi's Other Side (II)

Part 312

Miyagi's skirt sways gently.

I know if I stare too intently, she'll call me a "pervert" again, yet my gaze involuntarily drifts downward.

It suits her.
She's so cute.

Since she's no longer in high school, Miyagi doesn't wear skirts much anymore. I want to see her like this forever. If I'm being honest, I could stare at her legs, extending from the skirt, for eternity.

Her legs are filled with countless memories of ours. That's why I can't help but watch them.

I'm curious about the backstory of her choosing the skirt she wore today, but it's a minor issue now that we're at the aquarium together. Whether Utsunomiya picked it out or why Miyagi didn't ask for my opinion doesn't really matter.

Those trivial details pale in comparison to the fact that Miyagi chose to wear a skirt on a day out with me.

"Sendai-san, look ahead."

I hear her displeased voice and reply, "But I am, Miyagi."

We're heading towards a spot to see an animal with ears, a sea lion, which isn't far from where the penguins were.

Since we've been here before, Miyagi seems to remember too, as her steps guide us toward the sea lions. Even if I'm not looking ahead, it shouldn't be a problem.

"It's dangerous, you know. Stop looking at me and pay attention to where you're going."

Following her words, she gives my arm a nudge from the side. It's not enough to make me stumble, but the force slows my pace, leaving me a couple of steps behind her. I hurriedly catch up to walk by her side again.

"Hey, no going on ahead of me, Miyagi."

If the purpose was to focus solely on watching her skirt, walking behind would be better. But I want to walk beside her.

"You were the one not paying attention, Sendai-san."
"I wasn't distracted, just admiring your skirt."
"That's even worse. Stop looking and reflect on your actions."
"Okay, okay."

Underneath the calm sea-like blue sky, I shift my gaze from her skirt to the path ahead.

The adorable, skirt-clad Miyagi exists within the photos on my phone tucked in my bag. I can take as many pictures as I want.

But my priority is guiding Miyagi, not looking at her skirt. Even if we're heading somewhere she can reach without guidance, if she wishes for a guide, I'll guide her as many times as it takes.

"Oh, Miyagi. We kind of skipped the otters, didn't we? Want to go back later?"

Last time, she wouldn't budge from in front of the otters. At the zoo, she snapped countless photos of them.

I want to know what piques her interest, so I'll be ready for whatever she feels like seeing.

"Yes."

As expected, she answers.

"Alright, let's head there after we see the sea lions."

I glance at her with a smile, but she has an unusually difficult expression on her face.

“Do otters have ears?”
“I guess they must, but I’ve never really looked. Should we go back and check?”
“No, we’ll look later.”
“Do you really like animal ears, Miyagi?”
“No, not really. I was just curious since you mentioned ears.”
“I see.”

My heart bounces around like a tennis ball.

She’s interested in what I want to see.

Perhaps it’s a small thing, but hearing that Miyagi is influenced by what I say makes me happy. Even if only by a millimeter, moving Miyagi’s feelings is significant.

Though I feel like skipping, I walk alongside her at a pace neither fast nor slow. Miyagi, who walked so briskly toward the penguins, now matches my pace.

Even if the sea lions were ten or twenty kilometers away, I wouldn’t mind walking with her. But the destination isn’t far, and we arrive before I know it.

“We’re here.”

I tell her and stop at a spot where the lounging sea lions are visible.

“I can see their ears.”

Miyagi says while staring at the sea lions, adding, “They look kind of slippery.”

“Really? I think they look smooth.”
“They have fur, so they’re probably not that smooth.”
“Sea lions have fur, huh?”
“Yeah, even baby sea lions have fluffy fur.”

“Oh, right.”

Indeed, I’ve seen baby sea lions with fur on TV. So, it’s not surprising that adult sea lions have fur too.

I fixate on Miyagi, who is engrossed in the sea lions.

She isn't usually chatty, but around animals, she becomes quite talkative.

I take out my phone from my bag and aim it at her.
Snap! I capture a photo.
Miyagi doesn't protest.
She continues to be absorbed in watching the sea lions.

"Miyagi."
"What?"
"——Do you prefer sea lions or seals?"

Sea lions, seals, or me.

I had the silly urge to say that, but I hold back, not wanting to hear an answer that might hurt. Instead, I ask a simple question.

"I've never thought about it."

She says simply and pulls out her phone to take a picture of the sea lions.

With her not saying anything else, I seize the opportunity to capture her profile once more.

In the frame, Miyagi appears to be enjoying herself.

To put it simply, she's wearing the kind of expression she likely has when she's with Utsunomiya. Ideally, I'd like for her to look as happy as she does now, whether at the aquarium or not, whether Utsunomiya is there or not.

"Are you even looking at the sea lions, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi mumbles under her breath.

"I'm looking. That sea lion over there looks easy to grab from a crane game."

Without actually looking at the sea lions, I reply, and she glances at me.

"You definitely wouldn't win it, Sendai-san."

“Why not?”
“You’re terrible at crane games, remember?”
“Well, that’s true.”

Her statement is utterly correct, but thanks to my poor skill, Miyagi managed to get a penguin plush for me, which wasn’t so bad after all.

The penguin I originally wanted to win for her ended up becoming ours, knowing things about us that neither of us fully know about each other.

Adding such shared things to our space seems to make that house more and more ours, and I find that comforting.

I point my phone at Miyagi. Her brow furrows slightly before relaxing.

“Sendai-san, take a picture of the sea lions.”

While not quite an order, her voice carries a compelling force, prompting me to direct my phone towards the sea lions.

It reminds me of a similar situation at the zoo, being told to take pictures.

Penguins and sea lions are cute. I imagine the otters we’re about to see will be equally endearing. Still, they don’t capture my interest quite like Miyagi.

“Do I really have to take pictures of the sea lions?”
“Yes, take them and show me later.”

Her voice returns dull, but I'm not really amused either.

All I want my camera lens trained on, all my attention focused on, is Miyagi. I suspect she’d be delighted if I found a favorite animal and took countless pictures, yet instead of finding such an interest, I only want to look at her.

I refrain from voicing this aloud, lest I sour Miyagi’s mood.

No matter the circumstances, Miyagi is what captures my interest. Everything else seems insignificant. This remains unchanged even

though she has shifted from simply a "roommate" to someone living in something important.

“What kind of sea lion do you want to see, Miyagi?”

As I glance over at the creatures lazing about, it’s unclear whether they’re covered in fur or not.

“Any kind is fine, just make sure you take the picture properly,” she instructs with the authority of a teacher.

I want to fulfill her every wish. Yet, there are some things that simply cannot be changed.

Miyagi once told me to form my own likes and dislikes, but I realized I cannot provide an answer that would satisfy her. Likely, the vague and unresolved answer will remain elusive.

Whether in an aquarium or a zoo, my interest is solely fixated on Miyagi.

Since my attention is solely on her, any likes or dislikes are inherently tied to her. It’s nearly impossible for me to separate and create preferences that are independently mine.

Miyagi.

In kanji, her name contains only two characters; in hiragana, a mere three. It’s a common name that anyone can write, yet to me, it holds more significance than any other words or characters.

Miyagi, who seeks me out, is more precious than anything else. She gives my life meaning.

I capture the sea lion on my phone and show it to Miyagi.

“I took the picture.”

“It doesn’t look cute at all. Can’t you take it seriously?” she replies.

If she insists, I can indeed try to take a better picture of the sea lion. However, I’d rather save my phone’s memory for more pictures of Miyagi.

“Alright, but can I take a photo with you first?” I ask with a smile, noticing a deeper crease forming on Miyagi’s brow.

Miyagi's Other Side (III)

Part 313

"It really annoys me when you ask things like that," Miyagi says in a voice filled with irritation.

All I had done was express a normal desire to take a picture together. Considering we're at an aquarium, anyone else would likely say, "Sure," without any issue. It shouldn't be something that annoys someone.

But when it comes to Miyagi, standing in front of me, what's considered "normal" never applies.

"So, does that mean I can take a picture without asking?"

If I tried that, she'd probably, no, definitely get mad. I know this, but I had to ask anyway.

Asking if it's okay to take a picture together is a simple thing, a matter that can be concluded in an instant. However, I find myself wishing I could take Miyagi's picture without having to ask. It's not that I mind going to the trouble, but I want the freedom to capture her whenever I wish.

Still, Miyagi is always Miyagi, and she replied curtly, "No way."

"Then there's no choice but to ask, right?"
"... I don't want to be asked today. It makes me nervous."

Does that mean it's okay to take the picture, though?

I almost voiced the question, but swallowed it back down. If I said that, she'd surely answer, "That's not it," and that answer isn't what I want.

"I see."

I smiled at Miyagi and tugged at her arm. She leaned closer to me, and I moved closer to her as well. Switching my smartphone

camera, I snapped a selfie with Miyagi.

Click.

Captured within the frame, it's a picture of my smiling face with an annoyed-looking Miyagi at the aquarium. There's no sea lion in the picture, but that's not what matters here.

"Why did you take it? I never said you could."

Miyagi's face was full of dissatisfaction, and she pushed me away, breaking the closeness we just shared. It wasn't amusing, and I moved closer to compensate for the distance she'd created. But Miyagi averted her eyes towards the sea lions, not me.

"But you said I shouldn't ask, so I didn't ask before taking it, right?"
"Still not right."
"Then what needs to happen for you to let me take pictures?"

It's not that I desperately want to take photos together, but if Miyagi has conditions to let me take photos, I'd like to know what they are.

"Figure that out yourself. Besides, you've already taken one."

The irrational Miyagi was looking at me. Though she wasn't glaring, her gaze was sharper compared to when she looked at the sea lion.

"Since we're here, let's take a proper one."

I smiled at her, twice as gently as usual.

No matter what kind of face she makes, I want to capture Miyagi on my smartphone. Even now, as she looked like she might glare, I wanted to snap a picture of her.

Any kind of Miyagi is better than pictures of the aquarium's creatures, and if I could, I'd take as many pictures as I wanted.

"So, by 'proper' you mean you want to take one together?"
"Exactly. Together."

I replied without hesitation, and Miyagi thought for a moment before speaking.

"... Let's play rock-paper-scissors."
"So if I win, you'll take the picture with me?"

I waited for Miyagi to say yes, but she didn't say anything. Her gaze dropped to the ground as if she had dropped something, intently staring at the aquarium's floor.

"Miyagi, what about rock-paper-scissors?"
"Nevermind, we don't have to."

She muttered.

"Why not? Do you dislike taking pictures that much?"
"It's not that... It just doesn't seem worth it... Go ahead and take the picture."

Almost missing her words, rendered nearly inaudible, I nearly asked "Eh?" before I stopped myself. I looked at Miyagi, realizing she was glaring at me with a look that could pierce through steel.

"... Miyagi, aren't you being a bit too grumpy?"
"Is that bad?"
"Not really."

Step by step, I closed the distance between us, standing so close my shoulder could brush against hers.

I prepped my phone and smiled. But I didn’t press the shutter. The screen showed my smiling face and Miyagi's troubled one.

"Miyagi, in times like this, you should smile."
"That's impossible."
"Even if it's impossible, just smile."
"Then you smile, Sendai-san."
"I'm already smiling."

The words seemed to catch in Miyagi's throat, and she glared at the phone. On the screen, a clearly disgruntled Miyagi was captured.

Miyagi is almost always in a bad mood, hardly ever smiling.

Yet, her expressions are vivid. Or rather, she has a wide variety of "grumpy" faces.

Sometimes her eyes are sharp enough they could destroy my stomach, at other times she's like a pouting child. Her brow furrows deeply one moment, lightly another. Sometimes she looks like she's about to puff her cheeks out.

I'm never bored with the myriad "grumpy" expressions she shows.

I want to be with her, always. That's why it's okay if Miyagi is grumpy.

I'd be happy if she smiled, but I know that's not easy for her. Regardless of the circumstances, I want to stay by Miyagi's side. Even so, since we're already here, I feel like making a small selfish request.

"Okay then, you don't have to smile, but let's take a picture where we look like we're getting along."

When I spoke to the scowling Miyagi on the screen, she replied with, "What's that supposed to mean?" and I pulled her into a hug from the side.

"Like this."

I smiled warmly at the camera, and Miyagi pressed against my arm.

"Sendai-san, you're too close."

Though not so loud that it echoed through the building, her voice was quite audible from beside me.

"Miyagi, quiet down. If you make too much noise, it'll be a bother."
"I'm not making noise."

The volume of her voice lowered, but the wrinkles on her brow in the screen deepened.

"If you want me to let go, then smile. If you smile, I'll let you go."
"What if I don't smile?"
"I'll take the picture as it is. I don't mind either way, but what about you?"

Miyagi fell silent. Reflecting on the screen was her gaze dead set on the phone.

I found myself wanting to press the shutter as is.

Again, and again, and again.

Whether she's smiling or not, whether she's close to me or not, I always want to capture Miyagi.

"Sendai-san."

Her voice dropped a little lower.

"Have you made up your mind?"

No response came. Yet, the corners of Miyagi's mouth lifted in the image.

It's an awkward, mechanical movement, but it’s an expression close enough to call a "smile." I lowered my arm from her shoulder. Still longing to maintain some connection to her, I clung to her clothing, as a small request was made.

"... Include the sea lions in it."
"Got it."

I adjusted the phone's position to capture the sea lions at the edge of the frame.

Miyagi's intentionally exaggerated smile was endearing.

Now, unlike before, I found myself not wanting to press the shutter.

If I don't take the picture, I can gaze at this "smiling Miyagi" forever.

"Sendai-san, hurry."

She nudged my side with her elbow.

I didn't want to move my fingers. I wanted to stay like this, just a little while longer.

But that wasn't allowed, and as Miyagi poked my side again, I slowly moved my finger.

Click.

The sound signaled the end of a special moment, and Miyagi reverted to her usual self in an instant.

"It came out cute."

I said as I lowered my phone and looked at Miyagi.

"Sendai-san, you're really annoying."
"But it turned out cute, so it's fine. Look."

When I showed her the picture I had just taken, Miyagi pushed my phone back, protesting, "It's not cute."

"It is cute, though."
"Okay it's cute— I'm going to see the otters."

With that abrupt end to the conversation, Miyagi started to walk away, heading towards the otter exhibit at a brisk pace, leaving me scrambling to catch up.

"Let's go together," I called out.

I meant that I wanted us to walk side by side, so I tugged at Miyagi's arm.

"We're already going together. You're keeping up just fine, Sendai-san."
"That's not what I mean. Come walk over here more."
"No way. You always do weird things."
"All I did was take a picture."
"It wasn't just 'taking a picture.' You touched my shoulder too."

Without stopping, Miyagi shook off my hand and continued with a voice full of complaints.

"Sendai-san, are you having fun today?"
"I am. How about you, Miyagi?"
"Really?"

Instead of an answer, I got a question in return.

"Really."

"Is that why you're smiling?"
"Exactly. I don't smile when I'm not having fun."

As I said this, Miyagi stopped and stared at me.

I responded to her gaze with a smile.

Miyagi said nothing more as she began walking again. Keeping a reasonable distance, I walked alongside her as she headed decisively toward the otters.

"Sendai-san, smile," she said, stopping once more to look at me. I obliged, flashing a bright smile at her, and then she came out with the unexpected comment, "You might do well selling burgers instead of Maika."

"What? How did you come to that conclusion?"
"It just seems like it would be fun."

With that cryptic answer, Miyagi began to walk, and I continued by her side. We soon reached our destination, and with an indifferent voice, Miyagi declared, "I'm going to watch the otters, so keep quiet, Sendai-san."

As Miyagi began snapping pictures of the otters, I too took photos, capturing the otters and then secretly taking one of Miyagi.

She didn’t complain. She was absorbed in watching the otters. I was absorbed in watching her.

We spent a good amount of time in front of the otters before heading to a café.

After lunch, with time to spare, we moved on to see the seals. We viewed both obscure small fish and larger varieties too.

I snapped pictures of Miyagi and of the fish. Miyagi captured images of everything behind glass. We repeated this several times.

Before we knew it, the entire day at the aquarium had flown by, and it seemed like a good time to head home. So, I knew I had to say it.

Shall we head back soon?

The words were right there in my mind. Yet they wouldn't escape my lips. Miyagi wasn't saying anything either.

I don't want to leave.

Those feelings were too strong, and so I found myself just standing there in front of the seals that we had circled back to again.

"... Sendai-san, shouldn't we be heading back?"

Miyagi spoke up, still looking at the seals, saying the words I didn't want to hear. Desperate to prolong our time here, I tried to steer the conversation elsewhere.

"How about checking out the souvenir shop before we go?"
"Do you usually buy souvenirs on outings like this?"

Miyagi asked without budging from her spot in front of the seals.

"It makes for a nice memento. Why not?"
"And what kind of souvenir would you get for Mio-san?"
"Mio?"

The unexpected mention of a familiar person had me asking it back.

"Aren't you buying something for your friends? It's not an overnight trip, but people sometimes buy souvenirs when they're at places like amusement parks or aquariums. Isn't it like that?"

With Miyagi's words, I realized my intended meaning was being misunderstood.

I meant it as a keepsake of the day I spent here with Miyagi.

"You seem quite close with Mio-san," Miyagi stated flatly, shifting her gaze from the seals to me.

"I'm not getting a souvenir for Mio."
"Why not?"
"Because Mio doesn't need one."
"...What if it were for Ibaraki-san and the others?"

She suddenly brought up names of friends from high school.

"Maybe for them."
"You're close, aren't you?"
"With Umina?"
"No, with Mio-san."
"Is that so? It's just normal."
"I think it's nice."

I couldn't make sense of the conversation, nor of contrasting Mio with Umina, or the conclusion that I was close with Mio.

"Do you want a souvenir, Miyagi?"

Wanting to change the atmosphere, I asked a question I already knew the answer to.

"No."
"Let's buy something as a memento to bring home."

I knew full well that wouldn't change her answer.

"…I've got pictures, so it's fine."
"Pictures are enough?"

I asked, and Miyagi pulled out her smartphone from her bag, purposefully taking a picture of the seals as if declaring it her souvenir.

It's frustrating.

I knew she wasn't someone who cared about mementos, yet seeing her treat the seal photo as a souvenir left me feeling irritated.

"Sendai-san."

I had been about to complain when she called my name, prompting me to respond, "What?" only for Miyagi to point her phone at me.

Click.

The sound of the shutter snapping echoed, and then she tucked her phone back into her bag.

"Let's go."

Miyagi muttered as she started walking.

"Hey, Miyagi, what was that about?"
"Just showing you my phone, Sendai-san."

Miyagi replied without stopping.

"…Eh?"

While her response wasn’t strictly truthful, it wasn't that far from the truth—I had seen her phone after all.

Although it wasn’t an entirely satisfactory explanation.

"Hold on, Miyagi."

Miyagi kept walking, her destination seemingly the aquarium exit, and I caught up to her.

Miyagi didn’t stop. Yet she wasn’t walking at a pace that would leave me behind, either.

She walked at a pace that was both leisurely and swift—a contradicting speed that didn’t let her get too far ahead, ensuring I could keep up.

"Miyagi."

I called her name once more.

"Sendai-san, aren't you coming home?"

Miyagi turned to ask me.

"I’m coming."

Upon hearing that, Miyagi began to walk again toward the exit. I picked up my pace.

The penguins receded into the distance.
The seals, further still.
The otters and countless other fish, all faded into the background.

Everything at the aquarium grew distant, and I drew closer to

Miyagi.

Miyagi's Other Side (IV)

Part 314

The blue sky and the penguins. The ears of a sea lion. Friendly seals and small-clawed otters.

And the awkward smile of Miyagi.

Though I didn't buy any souvenirs, I brought back numerous memories from the aquarium.

The aquarium offers me something special.

Both the first and second times, I received something precious, important, and something I didn't want to give to anyone else. But, I can't be sure how Miyagi feels about it.

I doubt she didn't enjoy it, but now that she's here in my room, it's the penguin plushie she's getting along with and not me.

"Sendai-san, you're too close," Miyagi remarked in a curt voice while clutching the penguin plushie.

"Isn't that mean? Let's look together."

Miyagi sat next to me, looking at the photos we took today, but for some reason, she wouldn't show them to me. She just peered at her own phone screen, alone.

The distance between us is closer than it was at the aquarium. She's comfortable with our shoulders nearly touching, but she doesn't allow us to share memories.

"No," she responds bluntly.

Today, we made memories together, so I think it's at least permissible for us to look at the photos together and acknowledge how much fun we had.

"Isn't this when we're supposed to look at pictures and get excited?"

We had dinner at a family restaurant. Now, with nothing left to do but recount today's memories, I'm worried if I just let this continue, Miyagi will soon choose to return to her room.

"It was fun today even without getting excited now," she said, letting slip what kind of day she had, prompting me to lean my shoulder against hers.

"Let's talk about how fun it was while looking at the photos."

There's not even room for a platypus tissue cover between us. Still, I don't peek at her phone. Despite that, she places her phone on the table, just out of my reach.

"Show me the photos you took, Sendai-san."

"What about the ones you took, Miyagi?"

"Why should I have to show them to you?"

"What's the reason for not showing them?"

Miyagi fell silent to my words, clutching the penguin's wings tightly. After flapping them a bit, she reluctantly answered with a displeased look.

"...I'll show you after I sort them."

"Promise, okay?"

Just as I leaned in to kiss the earring adorning Miyagi's ears, she pressed her forehead against mine.

Is it that she doesn't want to make a promise, or that she doesn't want to be kissed?

I'm curious, but asking might get a response that says both, and that's not particularly appealing, so I settle for a concise word of complaint.

"Miyagi is stingy."

"I'll promise."

"Then you should kiss too."

I know what happens when things are said in situations like this.

Miyagi will almost certainly use Pen-chan as a substitute, and I'll end up kissing a plush toy. Before that happens, I grab Pen-chan from her arms and toss it onto the bed.

"Poor thing."

A concerned voice for the plushie comes from beside me.

"If this continues, I'm the one who's going to feel sorry," I reply.

"Why?"

"If I'm going to kiss, I'd rather it be Miyagi than Pen-chan."

"We were looking at photos, remember?"

"Photos can be looked at later."

"Sendai-san, you're such a pervert."

"Fine, pervert it is."

I press my lips to the earring I gifted her and plant a kiss.

So that I can see the photos Miyagi took.
So that we can visit places that will make Miyagi want to take photos again.

I wish for both with the plumeria earrings.

"Miyagi, keep your promise."

"I said I will," she replied, and I kissed the earring once more.

Thinking back to Miyagi in the aquarium, she seemed aloof but not in a bad way.

To put it bluntly, it's something one might call happiness.

Even though we were no longer roommates, nothing significant about our relationship changed—except that Miyagi now shows a new side of herself.

I touch her cheek.
I glide my fingers down and lean in for a kiss.
But before I could, Miyagi's hand touches my neck.

"Sendai-san, don’t move."

With a soft voice, Miyagi's hand touches the pendant chain and pulls out the pendant top hidden under my clothes. Then, more gently than when she used to order me, she strokes the moon ornament.

"It's been a while since I've touched this," Miyagi murmured to herself as she pressed her lips to the moon decoration, a gesture of ownership, reminding me of her kisses from back then.

"Sendai-san."

At her quiet voice, her words stopped and didn't continue.

Miyagi's fingertips brushed the chain. Her hand glided across my clothing, tickling me, prompting me to grab her hand, causing her to finish her earlier thought.

"...The aquarium was fun, but Sendai-san wasn’t mine."

Miyagi said something I didn't quite understand.

"I'm always Miyagi’s no matter where I am."

"No, you're not."

"I totally am. I’m wearing this pendant as proof that I’m yours."

The pendant I received in high school had long been like a collar, signifying that I belonged to Miyagi, both at home and school. That remains unchanged even now.

Wearing the pendant again after so long, it's a visible way of declaring that I'm hers.

"At the aquarium, at college, no matter when and where, I belong

only to Miyagi."

From back then till now and forevermore, I am Miyagi's, and that's how it should always be.

"Then become even more mine," she whispered, pressing her lips to my neck. Her teeth grazed and gently nibbled.

"Miyagi, that's a noticeable spot."

It's not enough to leave a mark just yet.
But I feel like she'll leave a mark if this continues.

"I'll do it where it doesn't show, don't worry."

With that, Miyagi lifted the hem of my clothes. Exposing my hidden stomach to her gaze, I instinctively attempt to cover it.

"Sendai-san. Your hands are in the way," Miyagi remarked in that flat tone of hers.

Her hands gripped my shoulders and pushed me down onto the floor.

Those straightforward eyes of Miyagi's bore into mine.

Under her gaze, I felt slightly self-conscious, but Miyagi watched me intently as her hands slipped inside my clothes.

"Is this spot okay?"

Miyagi's palm touched my abdomen. Her hand slid smoothly, pressing firmly against my ribs.

It's okay, but it's not okay.

If she wants to leave a mark there, she'd have to uncover even more of my clothes, and I'd end up undressed again.

"Can I do the same to Miyagi?"

"No."

Her response came immediately, without a moment's thought.

Denied the right to refuse, Miyagi naturally pulled up my clothes, pressed her lips to the spot she had touched, and sucked hard.

I was half-undressed and felt a hint of dissatisfaction, but since it was in a place hard to see, it was okay even if a mark remained.

Feeling the warmth of Miyagi against me made my heart race.

Thump, thump, the noise grew louder.

Below my chest, Miyagi's lips pressed against me repeatedly, sticking and unsticking, while her hand reached for my chest.

Miyagi doesn't seem intent on stripping me completely, but I never agreed to go this far. And when she's touching my chest and continuing to kiss my body like this—

"Hey, Miyagi. Is this, like, where we're heading?" I ask.

I'm not prepared for this.
It's not that I need to be prepared, but I just didn't expect today to take this turn.

The aquarium was fun, joyful, and serene—a satisfying day in itself.

Today's experiences spill out from my head.

Miyagi's hand drifts over my chest.
She doesn't answer my question.
The room is brightly lit, making everything visible.

"Miyagi," I say.

I grab her wandering hand that rests on my chest, and she looks up.

Under the light, our eyes meet.

Miyagi's hand withdraws from me and lightly caresses my side, as if searching for a spot to leave a mark.

"…Sendai-san," she calls my name softly.
"What?" I respond.

"You're red."
"Red? Where?"
"Here," she says.

The hand that had been tracing my side now touches my cheek and gently presses against it.

"…Wait a moment."

I rush to recover the memories of today that overflowed, trying to process the situation.

Red.
That word from Miyagi.
Her hand on my cheek.

It means my cheeks are flushed, and my heart thumps loudly.

This must mean that I'm finding this situation embarrassing.

"No. I won't wait."
"Please, just wait."
"Why? Sendai-san, you're mine alone, so let me do as I like."

Indeed, I'm Miyagi's alone, and I'm not interested in being anything else. But right now, I'd like her to hold on a little longer.

The Miyagi who was looking at the penguins, the Miyagi who managed an awkward smile, now wants to touch me.

My feelings can't catch up.

Miyagi’s hands traverse my body.
Her lips brush against my neck.
The kiss isn't meant to leave a mark; it's soft.

It feels as though we've become lovers, which is surprising for someone who’s no longer just a roommate.

Although that likely wasn’t Miyagi's intention, it feels that way to me, making my heart and mind go haywire.

This isn't good.
Just letting this happen won’t do.

I'll end up confessing everything to Miyagi.

Because she found today fun and wants to touch me, I want to take my time with this. If I'm going to express the feelings buried deep in my heart, I want to do it when Miyagi won't run away from me, when she'll truly understand how I feel.

"…Let's not rush this, okay?"

As I gently tug on Miyagi's hair, her lips and hands withdraw from my body.

"What do you mean?" she asks, lifting her face to look at me.

"Let's pick a different day for this."
"…A different day? When?"
"When would be good for you?"
"I don't know," she mumbles.

Miyagi sits up and suddenly presses the penguin plushie into my arms.

Chapter 109

Sendai-san Beside Me (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 315

There is no proper measure for good and bad things.

Just when you think a lot of good things have happened, bad things come all at once. Life sometimes presents a sandwich with good things sandwiched between bad things, or an anpan with bad things stuffed inside a crust of good things.

There's nothing that's just delicious.

I bite into the toast spread with jam and butter.

The bread is the usual. The jam and butter are the same as always.

Although it's the same breakfast, somehow, it tastes different today. Not that it's bad, but it seems lacking in sweetness and saltiness. Yet across the table, Sendai-san is enjoying the same thing with delight.

"…Miyagi, do you want my bread?"

Even though I hadn't called her name, Sendai-san looks at me.

"I didn't say that."
"Then what? You're looking at me because you have something to say, right?"
"Is the bread tasty?"
"It is. Isn't yours, Miyagi?"

Sendai-san makes a puzzled face. I gaze at her, her expression unchanged. Unlike yesterday, her cheeks aren't flushed.

"Just normal."

I mutter and take a large bite of the toast.

There's hardly any flavor.

I wash down the loaded toast with orange juice. The sausages and salad, which also seem to lack flavor, are eaten, leaving the plate empty.

The breakfast, which feels like it’s missing something, isn't the fault of the bread, jam, or butter. Of course, the sausages and salad aren’t to blame either. The bad thing is Sendai-san. Because of her strange reaction yesterday, it has stayed in my mind, messing with my taste buds.

"If you’re tired of jam and butter, I can get peanut butter or apple jam next time?"

Sendai-san suggests in her gentle voice. Her kindness is unchanged from yesterday. The Sendai-san eating breakfast with me is the same one who will be heading to university today as she was last week.

"Jam and butter is fine."
"Alright then."

After saying that, Sendai-san takes a bite out of her remaining toast and spears the last tomato from the salad with a fork. Even so, as if probing for something, she asks me:

"…Did you have fun yesterday?"
"I already I said I did."
"I remember."

I'd be troubled if it was forgotten. The aquarium was fun.

And that counts as a good thing. But what was bad was that in response to what I did, Sendai-san said, "Let's choose another day."

It's like bad things piled on a plate made of good things, poking at me with a prickling pain in my stomach.

"Do you want to go to the aquarium again, Miyagi?"
"If you don’t take a ridiculous amount of photos, I wouldn’t mind."
"But you said I should take photos."

Sendai-san replies with dissatisfaction and pops the tomato into her

mouth.

"I meant not of me, more like the fish and stuff."
"But I did take those, so what's the problem?"

Hearing Sendai-san's words, I think it would have been nice to capture a picture of her with flushed cheeks from yesterday.

A Sendai-san like that was rare. Just as it was rare for me too.

Yesterday, after returning from the aquarium, I did something. I didn't directly say I wanted it, but I did something that was obvious in what it implied. Even though it took a lot of courage, I think it's unfair for Sendai-san, who usually seeks such things, to refuse.

I gulp down the rest of the orange juice and stand up.

"I'll do the dishes."

Gathering the plates and glasses from the table to take to the sink, Sendai-san comes next to me saying, "I'll help."

I wash the dishes, and Sendai-san wipes them.

Even though she rejected the "flow" I created yesterday, today, without even asking, Sendai-san is creating a flow, and I can't reject it. The Sendai-san standing next to me doesn't blush or put off the dishes for another day. That's natural, yet it doesn't sit right with me.

If she's going to be an erotic demon, then she should act like one. What happened yesterday isn't fair. Sendai-san should take responsibility for her everyday words and actions.

"Miyagi, the plate."

She extends her hand to take the cleaned plate from me, saying, "If you daydream, you might drop it."

"Don't worry, I won't drop it."

I'm not daydreaming but deep in thought, so I won't drop or break a plate.

As I rinse the glass under the flowing water, I glance sideways. There's still something bothering me.

The Sendai-san from yesterday belongs only to me, and yet, she doesn't.

The Sendai-san outside isn't the same as the one at home, nor is she the same as the Sendai-san who rejected my advances.

When she's outside, she doesn't laze around like she does at home, nor does she make a blatantly displeased face. She always wears a smile and is considerate. Aside from taking too many photos, she's kinder and more elegant than other university students.

I don't dislike that type of Sendai-san, but there's a sense of distance. Not as artificial as when she was with Ibaraki-san during high school, but there are moments where she seems crafted and not only mine.

When she's beside me, she should only be my Sendai-san. I have no need for a fake Sendai-san.

"Miyagi, the glass."

Sendai-san speaks in a voice she wouldn't use outside.

"I was going to give it to you anyway."
"If you don't want to be told, then hurry up. If you dawdle, you'll be late for university."

Sendai-san says something she wouldn't say to anyone else but me.

I imagine she wouldn't show this side even to her university friends. But maybe she'd say such a thing to Mio-san.

"It's not that time yet."

I mutter in response, passing her the glass. Sendai-san said she wouldn't buy a souvenir for Mio-san at the aquarium, but she would for Ibaraki-san.

If she was with her friends, buying souvenirs would naturally be an option. Yet, she chose not to for Mio-san. This suggests there's no need to accommodate for Mio-san, making Mio-san closer to Sendai-

san than Ibaraki-san and the others.

It annoys me.

But just as I have Maika, Sendai-san having friends she can be herself around is a good thing.

I wash the sponge used for the dishes and look over.

"Do you and Mio-san ever hang out?"
"We do occasionally."
"And today?"
"You know I have work."
"After you finish work, maybe?"
"I won't."

Sendai-san puts away the dishes, firmly stating while looking at me.

"Then, if you didn't have work?"
"I still wouldn't."
"Why?"
"Because I want to come home early."

Hearing the answer I wanted, I feel relieved.

I can't forgive a Sendai-san who prioritizes her friends. Such a person would keep her from being just mine. Yet, it's not right to take friends away from her.

I dislike it.
It annoys me.
It's unforgivable, but it's something I must accept.

"What about you, Miyagi? No plans with Utsunomiya today?"
"Maika has work."
"Ah, I see."

In front of the sink, Sendai-san quietly speaks. Even though the dishes are put away, she remains still.

"Sendai-san, what about your necklace today?"

I point out what's different from yesterday.

"If you want me to wear it, I will."
"You don't have to."

I'd been curious since seeing her in the shared space, but it's not like I actually want her to wear a necklace. Besides, I hadn't seen her wear it since becoming a university student, so it's not something to fuss over.

Still, I asked her because I didn't want the conversation to end. I don't have anything in particular I want to say, but I don't want Sendai-san to leave the shared space.

It's not really a good thing to be thinking about this since morning. However, my emotions are all tangled up, with the fun memories from the aquarium mixed with what happened afterward.

"Are you heading to the university right away?"

Even though I know she's not, I ask Sendai-san.

"Not yet. I've got some leeway today."

Sendai-san smiles brightly. I reach out for her. As my fingers touch her cheek, Sendai-san jolts and steps back.

I'm not amused.

I close the gap she created, leaning in and placing a kiss on her lips.

"…What kind of kiss was that?"
"Because you're running away, Sendai-san."
"That's not really a reason, is it?"
"…You're acting strange."

Normally, Sendai-san doesn't back off when I get close.

"Is that so?"

She speaks as if it's nothing, and I step closer to her. Yet, again, she creates a distance, and we're separated by a step.

"Sendai-san, you're running away."
"It's not that I'm running away."
"Then why did you move just now?"

"Because my reason flies away when I’m with you, Miyagi."

With a smile, Sendai-san says something awful.

"It's time to head to university now."
"Indeed."

Her smile is so exaggerated it's almost unnatural.
Her timing truly is strange.
I stomp hard on Sendai-san's foot.

Sendai-san Beside Me (II)

Part 316

"I'm heading out first."

Sendai-san, who says suggestive things but doesn't do things like that anymore, said that and went to university before me. So I made sure to lock the door before leaving the house.

I walk the familiar path to the station as always.

Sendai-san's favorite calico cat isn't here. It's not that it never shows up in the morning, but it never seems to appear when I'm around. Sendai-san, however, sees the cat often enough to talk about it, so it must be doing well, watching her walk this route to school instead of me.

It irritates me—a lot.

The fact that the calico cat knows more about the path Sendai-san takes than I do feels immensely unfair.

As I walk down the sidewalk, I look left and right. Sure enough, no calico cat. I let out a heavy sigh, hurry to the station, catch the train, and head to university.

The moment I step into the lecture room, I spot Maika. I greet her with a "Good morning" before taking the seat next to her.

"Morning, Shiori. How was yesterday?"
"Yesterday?"
"Yeah, yesterday. You went to the aquarium with Sendai-san, right?"

Hearing Maika mention something only Sendai-san and I should know, I reflexively ask, "Huh?"

"I heard from Sendai-san. She said you both went together."

Whether it was through a phone call or a message, her source is

limited to those options. Regardless, both possibilities unsettle me.

"Yeah, we went."

I respond with forced cheerfulness. Even though I keep secrets from her, Maika is a dear friend, and I shouldn't let these feelings spill onto her.

My discontent should remain confined within me.

Still, I can't help feeling annoyed that Maika knows about the aquarium outing. I despise this side of me.

To add to it, I hate myself for being displeased with Sendai-san and Maika communicating behind my back. At this point, I'm hate myself more than broccoli, spring greens, or bell peppers.

"You both love aquariums, don't you? You went during summer break too."

Maika's cheerful voice reaches me, and I rearrange my expression to mask the swirl of discontent inside.

"It's perfect for killing time."
"Going to an aquarium to kill time? Sounds like a date."

The word "date" feels out of place between me and Sendai-san, but right now, I'm more concerned that yesterday's memories are spilling out.

"I heard something like that from you last year too."

Last summer, I had mentioned going to the aquarium with Sendai-san to Maika. Back then, I was the one who brought it up.

This time, it's Sendai-san who did, and that shouldn't bother me. People often end up mentioning who they went out with, whether they mean to or not.

Deciding to quell my restless feelings, I resolve to seal away my displeasure.

"True, but aquariums are a classic date spot."
"Maika, you know that's not the case."

"Maybe, but it's unusual to just hang out at an aquarium with a friend, isn't it?"
“Some people who love aquariums might do exactly that.”
"You said you went to kill time, didn't you?"

Maika's tone seems amused, which isn't funny to me, leaving me at a loss for words. She's always enjoyed teasing me since we were young.

"…Seals and sea lions are cute, and I wanted to see them."

When I manage to voice a halfway decent reason, Maika laughs playfully, “You two must really get along.”

"I think it's normal."
"You do get along well."

Maika's voice gets buried in the chatter of the lecture room.

Getting along.

Measuring the relationship between Sendai-san and me with those words is misleading.

That's a term for friends, and it's inappropriate to use it to describe me and Sendai-san. Besides, I don't want to be friends with Sendai-san.

She maintains a distant, superficial connection with her friends.

The friends I've seen her with are more like “pretend friends,” and I don't want to be put in the same category.

But I still can't stand that she has such people around her. I'm also terrified of the thought of her making a "real friend" someday.

"I want to go home."

I whisper and slump over the desk. Nothing seems to go right today. I want to go home quickly, to verify that Sendai-san is mine and mine alone.

“There it is, Negative Shiori.”

“Nothing's gone right since morning.”
“Why not cheer yourself up with the cute seal and sea lion photos? You took some yesterday, right?”

Maika pokes me in the side, prompting me to lift my head.

“I did.”
“Then let’s cheer up by looking at those cute pictures together!”

That’s a problem. I can't show them. The aquarium photos are still unsorted.

My phone's gallery contains pictures of Sendai-san at the aquarium, and I can't let Maika see them.

Having photos of friends on your phone isn’t odd, so logically, there’s nothing to hide. But Sendai-san isn’t my friend. To have her photos seen as “friend photos” is something I refuse to allow.

"They're not sorted yet. I'll show you after I organize them."
"Sorted, huh… Shiori, did you take pictures you need to sort through before showing?"
"I just didn’t get any good ones. I'll send over the ones that turn out nice later. How’s that?"

"Fine. But if they’re not cute, you owe me!"

"I'm not confident."

Maika replies with, “I only accept masterpieces,” continuing to laugh.

We indulge in idle chatter until the lecturer enters the room, and our conversation dies down, though the room doesn't fall into complete silence as the lecture begins.

Listening to the droning voice of the lecturer, I glance at Maika.

I can’t give Sendai-san to Maika. Nor can I hand over Maika to Sendai-san.

Sendai-san is meant to be mine alone; thus, Maika shouldn't get too close. And Maika, being my friend, means Sendai-san shouldn't get too close, either. Not even forming something that resembles

friendship.

If they did, Maika might become Sendai-san's real friend. For now, the person closest to being a real friend to Sendai-san is probably Mio-san.

Trying to prevent Sendai-san from forming such connections is wrong. Everyone needs those kinds of friends and should have them.

But part of me wishes Sendai-san wouldn't make any.

There's a constant conflict inside of me.

These feelings I harbor are wrong, not something that should be fulfilled. Even knowing that, I can't erase them.

At the root of these feelings lies jealousy, and I've been consumed by this trivial envy.

I can't bring myself to like this version of me.

Taking in another mental sigh, I look ahead.

My past with Sendai-san. My future with Sendai-san—

If only I could confide everything to someone— I start to consider, but then promptly reject the idea before it fully forms.

The answer is already decided—talking about it isn't an option.

What happened between us belongs solely to us. I do want others to know that Sendai-san is mine alone, yet discussing what has occurred or what might happen between us is not something I can easily do.

This isn't going smoothly at all.

This time a sigh escapes my lips, and I exhale quietly once more.

Sendai-san Beside Me (III)

Part 317

There are certain days when time seems to drag on, and today is one of those days. Sendai-san hasn't returned home yet, and I know exactly why. It's a day when she's working her part-time job as a private tutor.

Though I've seen and spoken to her student, I still can't grasp what kind of person they are. Meanwhile, as she spends time with them, my clock stands still.

Even after I came home with groceries from the supermarket, Sendai-san's return seemed like a distant event. Faced with this prolonged wait, I find myself boiling broccoli.

In the shared space where I'm alone, I peer into the pot. Green chunks, cut into bite-sized pieces, thrash and writhe in the boiling water. Poking at the broccoli with cooking chopsticks, the green masses scurry away hastily.

In my mind, echoes of "what Sendai-san and Maika talked about" swirl around.

"It doesn’t look appetizing," I mutter, feeling like a judge from hell as I poke the broccoli again before heating up a ready-to-eat Chinese bowl.

I take lettuce and tomatoes from the fridge and wash them. Tearing the clean lettuce into pieces onto a plate, I add the boiled broccoli and sliced tomatoes. I serve rice and the ready-made Chinese dish into a bowl—it's a hasty meal, but at least the colors are nice.

I place the Chinese bowl and the salad with dressing on the table, prepare chopsticks with a calico cat chopstick rest, and gaze at the broccoli, staring back defiantly.

"It definitely doesn’t taste good," I sigh, releasing my breath and my "Let's eat" at the same time. I toss the broccoli into my mouth and chew.

"See, it’s not tasty at all," I grumble to the calico cat chopstick rest on the table.

Part of me foolishly thought that if I could eat this despised broccoli with some enjoyment, maybe I could start liking myself more.

Occasionally, Sendai-san sneaks things I don't like into dishes, echoing some dull, unwelcome parental advice from the TV to rid me of my pickiness. Yet her efforts are futile. One doesn’t suddenly start liking something they hate.

Sendai-san is mean. She's quietly trying to change me.

Without her, I wouldn't have even considered eating broccoli. It would have been perfectly fine to leave the things I hate as things I hate, without ever pondering whether I might like them eventually.

I eat another piece of broccoli. No matter how many times I try, I can't find it palatable.

I eat the adequately warmed Chinese bowl. It’s nothing special, but compared to the broccoli, it's far superior.

I eat a tomato, then lettuce. After finishing the Chinese bowl, I glare at the remaining broccoli. Picking one up with my chopsticks, I swallow it whole. Still, some remain.

Feeling a bit impolite, I poke at the blobs of green with my chopsticks when suddenly, the door to the shared space opens, and I hear a voice say, "I'm home."

"Welcome back," I reply without lifting my eyes from the broccoli.

"What are you eating, Miyagi?" The voice asks.
"Broccoli. Made it into a salad."
"You've come to like broccoli?"
"I don't like it. It’s not good."
"Thought so. But maybe it’s not tasty because it's in a salad? If you're adding something you hate, make it into a dish you can enjoy better."

The voice from around the entrance grows closer, and when I lift my gaze, I find Sendai-san beside me.

"What kind of dish is that?" I ask.
"Like stir-frying it with some meat."
"You often stir-fry broccoli with meat, Sendai-san, but I'm not too fond of that."

"So, how do you think you could start liking it?"

"I don't think I'll ever like it. Here, you eat it," I push the plate, now only broccoli remaining, toward her, offering her the chopsticks. But Sendai-san doesn't take them.

"I'll eat it if Miyagi feeds me," she laughs, saying something entirely unamusing.

"…I'll eat it myself."

Three pieces of broccoli remain. I swallow them one by one, declaring, "This isn't tasty."

"Eventually, you might find it delicious," Sendai-san suggests, irresponsibly claiming, as she sits opposite me.

She seems in no rush to return to her room. For some reason, she finds great amusement in watching me.

And as for me, her gaze brings a certain comfort that makes it easy to ask something I've been meaning to.

"Sendai-san," I call out.
"What is it?"
"You talked to Maika about going to the aquarium, right?"
"Yes, I did."
"Why?"
"Utsunomiya contacted me yesterday. She wanted advice on what to wear for a live event. It just came up in the flow of the conversation."

There's nothing odd about Sendai-san's explanation. Maika was excited about attending a favorite game's live show with Asakura-san, and she did express a desire to consult with Sendai-san about what to wear.

In fact, it's no surprise that they're in touch. I've known that Maika

seeks Sendai-san's advice on things she can't really consult me about.

"How did it just come up?"

Sendai-san and Maika, although not as close as Maika and I, are still good friends.

I imagined that the aquarium story came up naturally in conversation, but realizing they talked enough to create such a flow makes my heart twist with a deep, pressing ache.

"I mentioned what I'd been up to that day, so I just brought it up. But more importantly, why aren't you going to that live event?"
"Well, it's a live show featuring songs from a game I don't play."

"I see."

The bright tone fades from Sendai-san's voice, and the conversation dully ends.

I'd like to say, "Please don't tell anyone about what happened between us."

But such words feel like erasing my existence, so I can't bring myself to utter them.

I won't say, "Please tell someone about what happened between us," but there's a part of me that wants her to know that I exist in her mind. And I feel like that part of me is growing stronger with each passing day.

Thinking about whom Sendai-san might speak of me to, though, weighs heavily on me.

It could be Maika or Mio-san.

The prospect of it being either of them is unappealing, and anyone else seems even less permissible than Maika or Mio-san.

"Sendai-san, do you have any close friends?"

I know I should clean up the dishes, but I remain seated, posing the question from across the table.

"It feels like you just insulted me," she replies.
"I just asked if you have any."

I'm sure Sendai-san's social circle is far wider than I imagine, so if not limited to close friends, she might count mere acquaintances too.

"Well, I do have close friends," she relents, and unprompted, lists Mio-san and some other unfamiliar names, with Noto-san's name conspicuously absent. That likely means a senior and a friend are distinct in her eyes.

"Who's your closest friend?"

Sendai-san's concept of "friend" differs from mine.

She only surrounds herself with superficial friends, and they don't have to be close. I don't know if it's intentional or not, but Sendai isn't the best when it comes to friends.

"Who's my closest friend? Does there really have to be just one?" she asks reluctantly, wearing a perplexed expression.

"Make a decision."

"Well, if I absolutely have to, then probably Mio."

The name I expected slips from Sendai-san's lips.

I don't like it.

If I could, I would sever all her ties and keep her locked away in this house. However, I know that's neither realistic nor what should be done.

Still, I dislike the fact that Mio-san is the closest person to Sendai-san at university. She's not my type, not someone I particularly want to get friendly with. But because she seems to be the closest to Sendai-san's "true friend," I have to do what needs to be done.

"So, Miyagi. What's this questioning all about?"

"Sendai-san, can you invite Mio-san over here sometime?"

"...Eh?"

Sendai-san stares at me intently, clearly baffled by my request.

"Not 'Eh,' I'm saying I'd like you to invite Mio-san over."

"...Why?"

"Because I want to meet her."

"...And what will you do when you meet?"

Her voice probes for more, fingers tapping lightly on the table.

"Nothing in particular."

"If it's nothing in particular, is there even any need to call her?"

Her reluctance is evident. A simple "I will" would suffice, yet Sendai-san holds back from saying it. It makes me want to say "never mind."

My resolve is that fragile, one push and it crumbles away.

"Mio-san is your closest friend, right?"

"That's true, but what does that have to do with inviting Mio over?"

"...You've been getting close with Maika, so I should also get to know Mio-san."

"—Can you even do that?"

I can't. I don't really want to see Mio-san, but I'm forcing myself to say I do, pivoting my feelings 180 degrees, so there's no way we could ever get along.

So I fall silent, and the shared space grows quiet again.

"Miyagi, do you really want Mio to come over?" Sendai-san's voice cuts through the quiet.

"I do."

If Mio-san were more like Ibaraki-san, everything would be easier. Left alone, Sendai-san wouldn’t change. She would continue focusing solely on me.

But with Mio-san, it's uncertain.

I’ve never encountered anyone as close as a "friend" to Sendai-san.

I should have observed the Mio-san who visited this house more closely.

"Let me know when you've arranged a date that suits Mio-san’s schedule."

I tell Sendai-san quietly as I rise to wash the dishes.

Chapter 110

I Can't Understand Miyagi Today (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 318

"Did Shiori-chan finally realize my charm?"

Mio declares, nodding enthusiastically.

Although she's my friend, she's someone I would prefer not to invite to my home. Today, her mood is high as usual. Since she first visited in March, Mio has been eager to visit again multiple times. Now, she sits happily across from Miyagi in my room.

Fun.
Very fun.
Extremely fun.
The table is laden with snacks and drinks.
An afternoon filled with so much fun it’s almost unbearable.

That's what I'm trying to convince myself, but my spirits aren't lifting. In fact, they're sinking. When Miyagi asked me to invite Mio, I complied, yet I don't feel the same excitement I felt when we went to the aquarium.

"Was it a long three months? ...Or something like that? I don't know, but I'm glad I waited."

Mio says brightly, and I look at her, perhaps a little enviously, as she seems to genuinely enjoy herself.

"Thanks for having me over today! Make sure to invite me more often."

With that, Mio suddenly hugs Miyagi without any warning.

—Eh?

My mind refuses to comprehend the situation.

Mio is hugging Miyagi.
Miyagi doesn’t resist.
With a vague smile, she says, "Mio-san, you're too close."

If I attempted the same, Miyagi would probably tap my shoulder or push me away, but she isn't resisting now.

I clutch my skirt tightly, then release it and take a sip of barley tea.

I understand.

This is her outward appearance; she can't just treat Mio coldly.

But I can't forgive it.

Today, Miyagi is wearing the outfit I chose for her. She did complain, but she let me pick a skirt and top. I thought I should be satisfied with just that, yet it proves impossible.

I am only Miyagi's, and while she's not solely mine, the only one who should touch her is me. She shouldn't be in contact with anyone else, even if the situation is unavoidable—it should still be avoided. I want her to do the impossible and reject Mio.

"Shiori, you and Mio-san are pretty close, huh?"

Utsunomiya, who was also invited with Mio today, chuckles.

Sitting across from Miyagi, she seems to enjoy the situation, appearing to be in a good mood like Mio.

Maybe I'm the only one not having fun.

"That's not true."

Miyagi says weakly after escaping Mio, and takes a swig of soda.

"Really, Shiori-chan? That's not the case?"

Mio's exaggeratedly sad voice follows as Miyagi's voice trails off with, "Uh, it's not entirely like that." Miyagi, sitting in front of me with her perfect outward demeanor, refuses to meet my eyes.

"Utsunomiya, sorry for the sudden invitation because of Mio."

I address Utsunomiya, who's been all smiles.

Originally, only Mio was supposed to visit, but then Mio said, "Since I'm here, I want to meet Shiori-chan's friends too," so Miyagi summoned Utsunomiya.

"No worries, I was free, so it worked out perfectly."

She replies with a bright smile. It's better than just having Mio visit, but I can't shake a feeling of dissatisfaction about Utsunomiya being here.

A friend who's close to Miyagi.

That alone makes it hard for me not to harbor feelings I shouldn't voice against Utsunomiya. I want to forcibly sever their relationship and make it so they can never reconnect.

Of course, I'd never actually do such a thing to a dear friend of Miyagi's, and mine too, but within my heart, emotions as murky as mud keep accumulating.

"Hazuki, aren't you unusually quiet today?"

Mio looks at me with a puzzled expression.

"I'm just tired of how energetic you are."

"Already? I just got here."

"It feels like you've been in this house for ten hours."

"I guess that means I've really settled into this room."

With her unswervingly optimistic tone, Mio laughs heartily.

"That's not what I meant."

"Hazuki, you're really cold sometimes."

Mio lets out a grand sigh, to which I respond, "Being cold to you is

probably just right." To this, Utsunomiya speaks up with interest.

"Sendai-san, you're different from high school, huh?"

"Really? Am I that different?"

"So different. Right, Shiori?"

"Yeah, you're different. I think Ibaraki-san would be surprised."

In a serious tone, Miyagi says, and Utsunomiya nods in agreement.

"Well, I'm not quite the same as when I was with Umina."

Back in high school, I deliberately tried to match Umina's pace. It was how I navigated my high school life best; and even if it was slightly restrictive, I believed it was for the best.

Now, I'm not trying to be who I was back then.

"Oh no, you're having a conversation I can't follow. Let me join in!"

Mio feigns a pout, acting a little petulant, and then, as if remembering something, speaks up.

"By the way, Shiori-chan. Why did you suddenly want to see me so badly?"

"I just thought it'd be nice to see you after a while."

Miyagi replies as if she had prepared the answer, taking a sip of soda.

It sounds like a lie.

When I previously mentioned that Mio wanted to visit, Miyagi was visibly against it. There's no way someone who felt that way would suddenly want to see Mio after a long time.

It reeks of insincerity, but questioning it wouldn't yield anything truthful, so it would be futile to press further.

"I wanted to see Shiori-chan too!"

With that, Mio once again moves to hug Miyagi, but I pull Mio’s arm away.

"Mio, stop hugging all the time."

"There it is. Overprotective Hazuki mama."

In response to Mio’s nonsense, I retort, "I’m not a mom," and let go of her hand.

"Yeah, because no mom would use their child as an excuse, saying someone left a kiss mark on them, right Shiori-chan?"

Giving up on hugging Miyagi, Mio grins mischievously, while Utsunomiya perks up, "Kiss mark?"

I shouldn't have invited them.

No matter what Miyagi had said, I should have resisted. Of course things like this would happen, and now I deeply regret it.

"Yeah, kiss mark. Hazuki came to university with a kiss mark, right? Shiori-chan, you wouldn’t know who the culprit is, would you?"

I immediately want to tape Mio's mouth shut and toss her into a soundproof room.
Then lock it, and throw the key into the sea so she can't come out.

"Does Sendai-san have a boyfriend?"

Utsunomiya directs the question not at Miyagi but at me.

"No."

"Hazuki. You definitely have a boyfriend. Even Maika-chan suspects it, right?"

Mio looks at me as if it’s the most obvious thing, referring to Utsunomiya as “Maika-chan.”

"I’ve said it many times, I don't."

"Got it. Then, a question for Shiori-chan."

Unconvinced, Mio turns toward Miyagi.

"Hazuki keeps saying lies like that, so if she does have a boyfriend, can you secretly tell me?"

In a hushed, conspiratorial tone that was nonetheless loud enough for everyone to hear, Mio declared, causing a small wrinkle to form on Miyagi's forehead. But that expression disappeared quickly as Miyagi turned her attention to me.

"Sendai-san, do you have a boyfriend?"

"You already know I don't. And Mio, I'll let you know when I find one, so hang tight."

"Hmm. I suppose I'll believe you. So, Hazuki, who's this boyfriend of yours?"

Mio chuckled, her eyes twinkling with mischief. With a deliberately exaggerated sigh, I replied, "That was just oil splashing up when cooking, nothing more."

"A burn, huh. Well, let's go with that story."

Mio declared with satisfaction, and Utsunomiya chuckled mischievously, "Shiori, you'll give me the full story later, right?"

What is this?
It's the absolute worst.

What was Miyagi thinking, telling me to invite Mio?

I can't understand it at all.
Miyagi doesn't seem to be having fun; she looks more troubled than anything.

The future looks grim.
I swallowed the sigh that threatened to escape.

I Can't Understand Miyagi Today (II)

Part 319

The start of June marks the beginning of hell. The Sunday that should have been spent peacefully turned out to be utterly chaotic, making me want to bury my head in my hands.

Although Mio stopped probing about the kiss mark, she wouldn't stop with the questions about a boyfriend. I know she's just teasing me for fun, but it becomes bothersome when she tries to drag Utsunomiya into the conversation and make it a big deal.

"Hey, Sendai-san, you were popular back in high school, right? Are you sure you don't have a secret boyfriend?"

Utsunomiya inquires innocently, and then Mio chimes in, "You're still popular in college, aren't you? Are you sure you don't have one?"

"I'm not that popular, and I don’t have a boyfriend, okay? More importantly, tell me about you two. Utsunomiya, is there anyone you’re interested in?"

I smile brightly and change the subject.

I feel like I want to turn this room into the depths of hell, dragging everything—including the penguin on the bed and the platypus tissue box on the floor—down with me into a boiling cauldron.

The purpose of this gathering still remains a mystery to me.

Not that it's boring, but it's not the kind of group that would normally gather in my room. Even Miyagi, the organizer, sometimes wears a difficult expression. Yet, she, the creator of this inferno, irresponsibly refuses to make any effort to improve the situation.

"Hmm, there's someone good-looking, but I'm not interested in dating them or anything. Just eye candy," Utsunomiya hesitates as she replies.

"Maika-chan, you should just go for it. If it doesn't work out, you can always move on to the next one," Mio offers advice that could either be sincere or teasing, adding, "Right, Shiori-chan?"

"Ah, yeah. I think so," Miyagi says sheepishly, but it's her own fault. She knew what would happen when she invited Mio, so she should face the consequences.

"If I went for it and it didn't work out, things would get awkward, and I'd feel like quitting my part-time job. So, I'm keeping it as just eye candy."
"Oh right, Maika-chan, you've got a part-time job, don't you?"
"Yeah, I sell burgers. Oh, and Noto-san came by once—"
"Was that the time Noto-senpai and Shiori-chan met? It sounded like it was amusing," Mio responds with a bright voice.

Surprisingly, Utsunomiya and Mio seem to be on the same wavelength, making the conversation lively. If they keep enjoying themselves like this, peace might finally come to this room—

Eh?

The flow of the conversation almost made me miss it, but the name that came from their mouths couldn't be ignored. I unconsciously repeat the name.

"Utsunomiya. Are you talking about Noto-senpai?"
"Yeah, she came to my work."
"I see."

I respond mechanically to Utsunomiya's words, then look to Miyagi. But Miyagi remains silent, and Mio continues speaking.

"Shiori-chan, you talked with senpai, right? What did you talk about? She kept saying it was funny but never told me what you discussed."
"Just normal stuff," Miyagi answers vaguely.

It was hard to believe that Noto-senpai showed up at Utsunomiya's workplace and talked to Miyagi, but Miyagi's response confirms that both Utsunomiya and Mio's stories aren't just made up.

"Miyagi, did you meet Noto-senpai?"

I ask in the gentlest voice I can muster, as if it's a trivial question, and she casually replies with, "Yeah."

"You didn't mention anything about it."
"It wasn't worth mentioning."
"When did you meet?"
"A little while ago."
"When was 'a little while ago'?"

I speak gently. As if it's no big deal. Like I'm talking to a friend. Despite my intentions, my voice is a bit sharper.

"The other day means just the other day. I don't remember exactly," Miyagi says, seeming bothered, and goes out of her way to take my glass to drink barley tea.

"Hazuki, you're hilarious. Stop acting like a mom all of a sudden," Mio laughs heartily at our exchange.

"I was just asking since I didn't know; there's no need to call me 'Mom'."
"Well, there are things you don't know. Normally, friends don't report every single detail of their day," Mio points out.

She states the obvious, leaving me with no choice but to agree. However, I have complaints. I have so many complaints that I could rant for an hour and it still wouldn't be enough.

Miyagi meeting Noto-senpai by chance at Utsunomiya's job should count as a significant event. Keeping quiet about it suggests there might be something secretly shameful between her and Noto-senpai that she wants to hide from me.

"Since I don't even remember exactly when it happened, there was nothing significant to discuss, right? You're overthinking this, Sendai-san," Miyagi remarks, as if tired of the conversation.

"I'm not overthinking. I just found it a little curious."
"You are overthinking. I just agreed to share a table with Noto-san when she asked if she could, and we made some small talk."
"But, Hazuki-mama," Mio giggles softly to herself.

Despite her teasing, I was more preoccupied by the fact Miyagi and Noto-senpai had met.

Noto-senpai, who's met with me several times, never mentioned Miyagi either.

What that implies is—

I have no idea. It's possible they really just made small talk and nothing of consequence happened, which is why neither mentioned it.

I could see it that way optimistically, but it feels unlikely. However, I know pressing Miyagi about it here and now will lead nowhere, as she's bound not to answer.

"Sendai-san, you really seem so different from the image I had of you in high school. I never thought you'd be such a worrywart," Utsunomiya's voice breaks into my thoughts on Miyagi, sounding amused but not as frivolous as Mio.

"Because Noto-senpai hasn't mentioned meeting Miyagi either, I'm a bit concerned," I respond lightly, squeezing the hand of the platypus toy next to me. Its grasp is soft and unreliable.

If possible, I wish I could immediately take Miyagi's hand, kiss her, and hold her close. Perhaps then, being able to feel Miyagi's warmth, I'd stop worrying about Noto-senpai.

"Seriously, Hazuki and Shiori-chan are so intriguing. it makes me want to install cameras in this house," Mio says while casting roaming glances around the room.

"Coming from you, it sounds like you'd actually do it," I retort.
"I'd let you put cameras in my house, so let me do it here too."
"Denied. Watching your daily life isn't interesting."
"Come on, take this chance to monitor my day. I'll even make it a special service," Mio bargains.
"What are you planning to offer as 'special service'?"
"A deluge of sexy shots," Mio teases back.
"...I'm adding you to the list of people to banish to hell," I warn.
"Hazuki is such a demon," Mio chuckles, exaggerating a sigh.

Though I'd rather be the one sighing, chastising Miyagi more than necessary, I'm relieved to brush it all aside, thanks to Mio changing the atmosphere. I might even give her a chance to avoid that trip to

hell.

"Then, offer us a fun topic to discuss. If you do, I'll remove your name from the list," I tease Mio.

"Okay, how about this? Why don't we all start working part-time at my café?" she suggests.

"Why suddenly bring up part-time jobs? And are you really that short on staff?" I ask, curious about Mio's spontaneous suggestion.

"Well, the idea of everyone working together is a joke, but we are hiring. Maika-chan, if you ever get tired of selling burgers, just give me a shout," Mio beams at Utsunomiya.

"If I ever get bored, I'll definitely consider it," Utsunomiya replies.

"Shiori-chan, you can come work part-time too, anytime you want," Mio offers.

"I'm not really into part-time jobs..." Miyagi responds hesitantly, clearly not wanting to even feign interest in working.

"Don't say that. Just let me know whenever you feel like it."
"Well, if the mood strikes me..." Miyagi trails off.

The organizer of our little slice of hell lacks energy today. Still, the infernal gathering Miyagi initiated drags on at a leisurely pace.

Thanks primarily to Mio, the conversation flows without pause. Gradually, our afternoon gathering evolves from a hellish meet-up into a dinner party as we enjoy pizza together.

As the pizza disappears and an unexpectedly friendly atmosphere prevails, Mio and Utsunomiya exchange contact details, pulling Miyagi and me into their network—transforming our girls' hangout into a farewell of sorts.

As Utsunomiya left, she said, "Sendai-san, if you ever get a boyfriend, make sure to introduce him to me!" Her enthusiastic comment left me a bit unsettled, but there's nothing I can do about it now.

It's all Miyagi's fault. She should bear the brunt of today's chaos

since she instigated it, and I'd prefer not to get involved.

Miyagi better explain clearly to Utsunomiya that there's no boyfriend in the picture for me. And she should admit it was her who gave me the kiss mark.

While the matter of the mark on me is fading into obscurity, it's clear expecting Miyagi to openly declare the kiss mark as her doing is unrealistic.

Still, if it became known that I belong to Miyagi, the issue about a boyfriend would simply vanish. Regardless of any future marks, no one would question it any longer.

It's not practical, though.

"Miyagi, this has been exhausting because of you," I tell her, even after Mio and Utsunomiya have left, noting she hasn't gone back to her own room.

"It's not my fault," Miyagi retorts, sounding displeased as she swats my arm playfully with the platypus toy.

I look at her, noticing the furrow between her brows. The usual air has returned between us.

After all, it should be just Miyagi and me in this room. Miyagi should always be by my side, and I by hers. I want to eliminate any future that differs from that.

"This all happened because you said to invite Mio," I assert, leaning against the bed and reaching for Miyagi's hand. But she quickly pulls away, leaving me to grab the platypus's hand instead.

"What happened?"
"Think back to today's conversations," I challenge.

My words deepen the line on Miyagi's forehead. Although much of today's talk was trivial, some topics took a heavier toll. It wasn't the worst day ever, but far from the best.

"So, are you satisfied now that you called Mio over?" I ask, staring at Miyagi. But she doesn't respond right away.

The once noisy room falls silent as Miyagi lowers her gaze to the floor.

She's pondering intensely about something, but it doesn't appear favorable. Before Miyagi concocts a new hell to accompany the one from earlier, I call out to her.

"Miyagi."

A small voice answers back, "Sendai-san." Then silence encroaches once more. When I call her name again, she finally lifts her gaze to meet mine.

"...I think you should treasure Mio-san," she says unexpectedly.

"Eh? I don't understand what you mean."

"It means exactly what it sounds like."

I understand the words, but I don't get why Miyagi is suddenly advocating for Mio.

"And what do you propose I should do to treasure her?"
"...Be friendly with her."

Be friendly with Mio.

That's already happening to some extent; Mio and I maintain a reasonable friendship. It's not something Miyagi needs to tell me, nor something to point out to me exclusively, because I'm hers alone.

As long as I remain Miyagi's, that's enough. She herself said so.

So it makes no sense for her to suddenly urge me to befriend Mio more deeply.

"...And you're okay with that, Miyagi?"

"Of course not. I don't handle Mio-san well at all," she admits, and I feel a wave of relief from her more honest response.

I want Miyagi to feel that it's "not okay" for me to become close with anyone else.

"If you're not fond of Mio, why did you suggest inviting her?"

"I told you before; to become friends," Miyagi repeats.

"That's a lie."
"It's true. I wanted to understand what kind of person she is."

"And did you?"
"Sendai-san is mine alone, so turning into Mio-san's is not allowed, but it's better if you become proper friends with her."

Miyagi rushes through her dull rationale while grabbing my hand from the platypus. But I make Miyagi hold the platypus's hand instead.

She isn't answering my question, and this isn't the Miyagi I know.

Her sudden emphasis on "friends" made her act more like a "helicopter mom" than I was before.

"Miyagi, you should say not to get too friendly with Mio," I suggest, my tone lowering.

Miyagi averts her gaze. The atmosphere turns awkward.

"...Sendai-san, don't you need friends?" she mutters.

"Miyagi is all I need. I belong to you," I say confidently.

"...That's true, but it's not. I just think you should be more proper."

"What do you mean by proper?"
"Make genuine friends and bond with them. But I can't allow you to do that, so from now on, just stay silent," she orders, unexpectedly sharp.

"What?"

"No talking until I say it's okay."

I don't understand.

Why is she trying to get me to make friends?

Why is she trying to keep me quiet?

I don't understand.

Without me understanding, the buttons on my blouse are undone.

Miyagi lets go of the platypus's hand and slowly unbuttons them, one by one.

"...What are you doing?" I ask, grabbing her hand firmly.

"I told you not to talk."

"If I'm not supposed to talk, tell me what's happening."

"...Sendai-san wasn't just mine today, so I'm making sure you're mine again."

"And that's your fault, Miyagi."

"Sendai-san, you're noisy. Be quiet," she chides.

"I haven't been told what you're doing."

"You don't need answers to understand, just be quiet."

Her hand retreats from mine, and she resumes unbuttoning.

"You're serious?"

Miyagi remains silent, but all my buttons are eventually undone. She presses something warm against my neck.

I Can't Understand Miyagi Today (III)

Part 320

A soft, lingering kiss is placed on the nape of my neck, just light enough to not leave a mark. The front of my blouse, unbuttoned, opens slightly as Miyagi gently traces her hand across my collarbone.

On the day we went to the aquarium, Miyagi, who was no longer my roommate, did something like this. Just like then, I can't keep up with my emotions.

Her lips part, and she places a tender kiss on my earlobe. Miyagi's hands slide up my camisole and caress my sides.

It feels both ticklish and pleasant.

"Miyagi."

When I softly call her name, she lightly grazes her teeth against my neck.

Not painfully, but gentle. Just strong enough not to leave a mark.

Whether she was my roommate or not, the comfort of her touch hasn't changed. Yet I don't want to go back to just being roommates.

When Miyagi asked me about what I held dear, I answered that it was "this place." Since then, this house has become precious to me in her mind, and a place I return to, and we have become "the people living in something important."

While it might seem lacking, this kind of relationship where I'm "someone living in something important" to Miyagi pleases me.

Her lips trail down my neck, as if confirming my existence. Her tongue presses against my skin, leaving deliberate traces.

What should I do?

Today is different from the day we went to the aquarium when Miyagi thought it was fun and wanted to touch me. Her day doesn't seem as joyful today. Though she still desires to touch me, the manner feels different.

Continuing like this, I feel like I might blurt out that I love her, swept away by the heat between us. So, before it reaches that point, I want to properly convey the feelings that have long been buried deep in my heart to Miyagi.

But today, just like that day, it's not the right time when Miyagi wouldn't run away, and she wouldn't fully understand my feelings.

I understand this.

If I keep waiting for the right timing, I might never express my feelings to Miyagi in my lifetime. Nevertheless, I find myself torn between wanting to say it and not.

"Miyagi..."

I want to continue with "I love you," but Miyagi interrupts my timing.

"Sendai-san, be quiet."

She whispers softly in my ear and bites gently at my neck once more.

I can't imagine she would return my love right now, even if I confessed. Even though Miyagi has shown more signs of interest in me lately, I can't imagine my feelings being reciprocated.

Miyagi easily cuts ties.

She used to define our bond with a 5000-yen rule, and as university students, even now without the money, she still wants to end it with graduation. The time limit remains set at graduation. Even though we're no longer roommates, it didn't get revoked.

Our connection has deepened compared to the past, but for Miyagi, it's likely deep enough to bury my feelings completely.

"How long should I stay silent?"

Caught in indecision about whether to voice the feelings buried deep inside, I ask her. I don't want to risk bringing our graduation deadline any closer.

"Until I say it's okay."

With unreasonable words, she presses the hand on my side more firmly.

The places she touches burn with heat, melting away my constraints. She pushes my shoulder, making my body tilt. I'm tempted to go wherever this takes me, but stubbornly, my mouth moves on its own.

“What about the order?”

It's a delaying tactic, offering no clarity for my indecisive heart.

“…Order? What order?”
“I want to touch you, too, Miyagi. If we're going by order, isn't it my turn today?”

The first time, I was the one who touched Miyagi. The next time, she touched me. Following that order, we took turns, and the last time we were together this way, she made the move.

"I don't think things like this follow an order. We changed the date like Sendai-san said the other day. Isn't that enough?"

Miyagi says, sounding a bit annoyed.

"Order or not, I want to touch you."

This is the truth, but there's more unsaid. Rather than arranging my emotions and timing my confession, what I truly desire is to touch and be touched by Miyagi.

“No. I’ll do it.”

She presses on my shoulder with more force, and despite mentioning turn order, I'm not committed to the idea, nor do I want to reject Miyagi. My body edges closer to the floor.

“Wait a moment.”

I try to hold back my weakening rationality with words, halting Miyagi's actions.

“Miyagi. I haven’t said it’s okay yet.”
“…Do you not want to?”

The previously assertive Miyagi now sounds more clingy.

I look at her intently.

Her eyes are like that of an abandoned cat, leaving me only able to mutter, "It's not that I don't want to."

"Then, Sendai-san, you can't talk anymore."

The stray cat dictates.

“Why?”
“It's a penalty game for lying about Mio-san.”

“A lie?”
“When we were at the aquarium, I mentioned how close you and Mio-san seemed, and you said it was ‘normal’. That was a lie.”

Indeed, I did say that there. But that was the truth; it wasn't something Miyagi should call a lie.

“It's not a lie. The way things are with Mio is ‘normal’.”

“I don’t think so. You enjoy picking out clothes, you like your tutoring job, and you said you like cheesecake. You also like the color blue and calico cats… Though, I’m not sure if you really like all that as much as you said. However, with Mio-san, you’re clearly close. I don't think that's a mistake.”

In a rare moment of speech, Miyagi grips my blouse tightly. She exhales softly and looks at me with eyes filled with determined resolve.

“So, penalty game. Sendai-san, just be silent for now.”

If Miyagi tells me to be silent, I will be. If she wants to keep going,

then so be it.

I long to touch Miyagi, and I find it pleasurable. I enjoy being touched by her as well, and I find that pleasurable too. As long as I can be closer to her than usual, either is fine.

Still, I can't accept the accusation of lying.

“What makes you think Mio and I are close, Miyagi?”

“You really don’t know?”

“I don’t.”

“When you were in high school, you pretended to enjoy reading magazines and laughing along with Ibaraki-san, remember?... But with Mio-san, you don’t pretend much.”

Miyagi speaks with dissatisfaction, adding quietly, "That kind of thing pisses me off."

“So, you're saying I should pretend with Mio?”

“You’re not getting it, Sendai-san. As much as I don't like it, just stay like you were with Mio-san. I wanted to get along with your real friends, but after seeing Mio-san today, I know it’s impossible.”

Her fist gripping the hem of my blouse presses tightly against my stomach.

Not too strong, but enough force to convey her frustration. I grab her hand in response.

“You don’t have to be friends with Mio, Miyagi.”

“Sendai-san, you should stay friends with Mio-san.”

Our conversation seems to miss each other’s points.

In the past, we often found our conversations mismatched, but today it seemed more pronounced. Likely because Miyagi had no intention of aligning with me, and I wasn't inclined to yield, either.

"Even if Miyagi doesn't like it?"

I tightened my grip on her hand. Giving her hand a firm squeeze, I leaned in to kiss her cheek. Yet, something about it didn't sit well with Miyagi, and she peeled my hand away.

"Even if I don't like it, you should stay close with her. As much as it annoys and angers me that you're close with Mio-san, I think it's good for you. I think having such relationships is important for you. Also, if you discover things you like or dislike more than what you mentioned earlier, tell me. You belong to me, so you should report everything."

"…So I should maintain a friendship with Mio and share anything new I like and dislike?"

"Yes. Behave like a proper human. That way, I'll believe in you more. But because it annoys me, show me the Sendai-san that's ‘just for me.’"

Miyagi spoke as if I were something less than human right now.

However, the fact that she wants to trust me makes me happy.

Although it proves I haven't fully earned her trust, knowing what I need to do to gain it isn't entirely bad.

If I try to gain her trust, it will annoy Miyagi, which is a big problem, and I'm not happy with this turn of events, but there is only one answer I can choose in this situation.

"...Alright."

Upon my reply, Miyagi's hand moved to my blouse, undressing me as if she'd been waiting for my words.

"I'll do what you said, Miyagi. But can we move to the bed? It's uncomfortable here."

"Okay."

Miyagi answered softly, standing to move the penguin from the bed to the floor. Lifting the blanket, she sat on the bed with a small thud. As I tried to approach the bed, she complained, "Not until you finish undressing, Sendai-san."

"I'm already out of the blouse."

"You still have other things to take off."

Miyagi was always like this—eager to undress me.

I've known this for a long time, and there's no reason to hesitate now. Many times before, I've undressed before her.

Thus, I follow her direction today as well.

Peeling off the camisole.
Unzipping the skirt.

With my heart thumping noisily, I let the clothing drop to the floor without folding. I know Miyagi won't be satisfied if only a part of what covers me is removed.

"Your underwear too."

Her predictable request came.

"…I'm embarrassed."

"I know, Sendai-san, you're blushing."

The lights were still on.
I could see Miyagi's face clearly.

Which meant Miyagi could see mine as well, and I knew she wasn't lying. Feeling the heat on my cheeks, it would be strange if they weren't red.

Since our new relationship began, Miyagi has been close, and in such moments, maintaining my composure was impossible. Of course, it was never comfortable before, but today my heart raced as if trying to break free from my chest.

"Hurry up, Sendai-san."

She naturally commanded, and I sat on the edge of the bed.

"If you want me to undress, you take it off, Miyagi."

I didn't trust myself to move correctly, and if I must undress, I'd rather it be Miyagi doing it.

Miyagi makes the bed creak as she closes the gap. She circles her arms around me, unhooks my bra with quiet ease, and lets the fabric covering my chest slide onto the bed.

No matter how often it happened, being the only one undressed was unsettling.

"What about you, Miyagi?"

"I'm staying dressed."

"The lights?"

"If I turned them off, I wouldn't see the expressions you only show to me, so no."

Despite her words, Miyagi's gaze wasn't on my face but on my now exposed chest. Although I felt it was improper to gaze so intently, Miyagi had no reservations.

"Pervert."

Though the penalty game meant staying silent, I couldn't help but speak out given her gaze. Adding to the grievance, I push her shoulder, prompting her hand to touch my neck.

"…And make the sounds you don't make for anyone else."

She traces her fingers along my throat slowly.

"Even though I'm not supposed to speak?"

"You can make those kinds of sounds."

"…Miyagi, you're such a pervert."

"It's that kind of penalty game."

"That's fine. But in exchange, just for now, call me Hazuki, will you?"

"If I feel like it."

"Miyagi, you're really unfair."

But her unfairness is why I can accept her.

I've longed to do these things with Miyagi. I wanted to touch and be touched by her. I was waiting for the day when either became possible.

If she hadn't been so forceful today, I don't think it would have turned out like this.

"…I'll be quiet, so just do it."

I whisper, pulling Miyagi's arm and we lie down in the bed where I've had so many dreams about her.

I realize I am unfair, too.

Relying on the penalty game, I can stay silent without having to organize and confess my feelings. I also avoid needing to ask what transpired with Noto-senpai at Utsunomiya's part-time job. By swallowing my words, I cling to something non-friend-like with Miyagi, something only shared between us.

I know it's a convenient interpretation.
For now, I want to be swept away by Miyagi.

"Sendai-san."

Although I asked to be called Hazuki, Miyagi doesn't, and she leans over and kisses me.

Tracing my lips, my neck, my collarbone.

Delicate, light kisses, interspersed with gentle bites.

Over and over and over again.

Today's stray cat Miyagi behaves quite well. Besides the occasional finger brushing my face, she sticks to kisses and gentle bites.

This is troublesome.
Though I don't dislike kisses, it's not all I want.

I thread my fingers through her dark hair and gently tug, prompting a delicate bite on my neck. However, it isn't forceful enough to leave a mark. Given Mio’s discussion about kiss marks, perhaps she's mindful, but Miyagi not declaring ownership in such a situation leaves me wanting more.

"Miyagi."

I mutter softly while stroking her black hair. Even though I've accepted the penalty game, I haven't sworn it under the earrings, so I permit myself this little speech.

Miyagi's hands caress my sides.
She has no complaints about me opening my mouth.
Her lips slide down from my neck, pressing firmly over my heart, sucking hard enough to leave a mark.

About three, perhaps.

Marked by Miyagi, her hands are placed on my chest. My body flinches involuntarily, and I unconsciously grab her shoulders. I let out a small sigh at my body reacting so dramatically to just a touch, and Miyagi looks up.
Our eyes locked.

I release her shoulders and she shifts to straddle my waist.

Her hands reach out to my chest, gently caressing.

She's wearing the cute clothes I picked for her. When I grab the hem of her shirt, her hands press harder against my chest, making me shudder. It's not a big deal, but being observed by Miyagi makes my body overreact.

It's not much fun.
I try to hide my face, wanting to avoid her eyes, but she grabs my arm.

"Sendai-san, don't hide your face."

"I can't."

"Show me."

Miyagi insisted, meeting my eyes.

Embarrassment, awkwardness—all those feelings are ignored as she continues to stare, leaving me nowhere to hide. My body feels hot, as if overcome by a fever.

Her hands slide across my chest. Her fingertips stop at its center.

As she caresses the obvious sensitive spots, a moan almost escapes my lips, and I bite them to hold back. Miyagi's gaze is still locked with mine.

She had claimed to want to see expressions I never showed to others, yet observing this way felt different, like she was studying me rather than just looking.

"…Stop watching."

Although there was nothing I didn't want her to see, I felt uneasy being observed while she touched me. It made me want to hide my reactions to her hands and gaze.

"No."

She firmly refused, moving her hands with intent. She brushes along my side, as if confirming the bones beneath, and moves to my shoulder.

"Tell me where it feels good, Sendai-san."

With her hand trailing behind my ear, Miyagi teasingly requested.

"Wasn't I supposed to be silent?"

"Answer my questions."

"You're such a pervert. So selfish."

"Where does it feel good? Tell me."

Miyagi watches attentively, clearly not planning to take silence as

an option, but it was too bright in the room to answer. The light from the ceiling reveals my rationality, holding my words in check.

"How about here?"

Without breaking her gaze, she traces a finger along my collarbone. When I stay silent, she slides her fingers down to my chest, asking again, "How about here?"

"…Come closer, and I'll answer."

Miyagi stayed persistent, erasing any real choice of remaining silent. If I were to speak, I at least wanted something in return.

I could tolerate the lights being on, and tolerate being watched, but her body heat felt too distant. At moments like this, we should be close enough to share each other's warmth.

I tug on Miyagi's arm.
The ceiling that occupied most of my vision vanishes, and her face comes close.

Wrapping my arms around her back, I caught her.
I bite into her neck, and when she calls me "Sendai-san", like magic, the words caught in my throat slip free.

"Everywhere you touch feels good."

"That doesn't help. Tell me one by one... How's this?"

Miyagi says something cruel, trailing her teeth along my ear.

"…It feels good."

"And here?"

Her fingers slide over my collarbone, lips pressing down.
Her tongue traces the path her fingers took, and her lips press tightly against me.

"It feels good."

I softly respond, and she marks her territory over my heart. Then she pulls away and sucks on the center of my chest.

"Mm..."

A sound escapes before I could stop it. Miyagi doesn't raise her head.
Instead, she places her teeth on the spot where her lips had been pressed.

"I didn't say you could do that."

Her tongue repeatedly flicks over the hardened part of my chest, as if licking away my reason, and I reflexively press against Miyagi's forehead.

"Doesn't it feel good?"

Her fingers retrace the path her lips had followed.

"You... shouldn't need me to say it."

"Say it."

Ordered in a brief but firm tone, I respond, "It feels good."

Her lips move to my ribcage.
Sucking to leave another faint mark.
Nibbling at my side.
And once more her tongue explores my chest.

All while she continues to ask if it feels good.

Everywhere and anywhere, yes, it feels good.

Repeating my answers, Miyagi continues marking me, shallow breaths making my replies hoarse and broken. I let out a voice that I wouldn't want anyone else to hear. My heart races, leaving me behind—suffocating, I cling to Miyagi.

It feels good when her fingers crawl over my body.

It feels good when her tongue presses against me.

Her body temperature feels good.

Miyagi's heat seeps into my core.

"More, Shiori."

As I attempted to call her name, she bites deeply into my shoulder. No complaints greeted her.

Miyagi's hand slides over my waist, then move between my legs.

Her fingers enter beneath my underwear, peeling away fabric that stuck to my body, reaching a place I allowed no one else to touch.

Yet her fingers pause, unmoving.

"…Are you okay?"

Instead of repeating her earlier question, she asks something different. Likely related to where she's touching, causing it to be anything but okay.

"Keep going."

I pull Miyagi into an embrace.

—Because it's not okay, I want her to continue.

"Okay."

She murmurs softly, her fingers pressing in.
My voice comes out louder than usual and I bite Miyagi's ear.

Her fingers dance leisurely, the heat from Miyagi and I mingling into a molten mess that spills out. Her slow movements caress a place only Miyagi knows, and her exhaled breath is hot.

"Sendai-san, I want to hear your voice."

Her words unsteadies my already erratic breathing, and I bite my lips.

I don't want to be heard.

The sound emerging from me seems foreign, urging me to bite my lips forever.

"Sendai-san."

Coaxed pleadingly, I call out, "Shiori."

The feverish voice seems unbearable, and I nearly cover her ears.
Still, she calls me again with that needy tone, "Sendai-san."

"…Call me Hazuki."

Miyagi's fingers move smoothly, rubbing hard against me.
But still, no sound came forth.

"Shiori."

A soft whisper.
Miyagi remains silent.
So once more, "Shiori."

"…Hazuki."

It's a name that all my friends call me naturally.
But from Miyagi's lips, it sounds different.

The name she calls me when we're doing something we don't do with anyone else is burned into my mind.

"Hazuki, does it feel good?"

She asks in a voice that sounds like she'll be anxious if I don't say it out loud, and I answer, "It feels good."

"Hazuki."

The stray cat whispers, nuzzling against me.

Again and again.

The name, which means August, is engraved deep inside me every time Miyagi calls me, becoming indelible. The name engraved on me belongs only to Miyagi, and no one else. It is written in Miyagi's voice, and leaves a clear mark that will remain forever.

This is the act of imbuing the name with a special significance.

I will continue to be held captive by Miyagi, who calls me by a name that represents me in a way that no one else can.
"Hazuki."

A mark that no one can erase, that I don't want to let anyone erase, is engraved on me.

Every time she calls me by that name, a messy release overflows, staining Miyagi. It clings to her so much that Miyagi and I mix together and become inseparable.

"Shiori, more."

The "Hazuki" called by friends isn't necessary.
But I will yearn for the "Hazuki" called by Miyagi forever.

While it isn't as though I don't need friends, for now, Miyagi alone is enough.

In the past, I had many people I could call friends, but they were just a means to navigate social settings smoothly and to live an appropriately enjoyable life. That had been enough, until Miyagi changed me.

If Miyagi wishes for me to be "someone who makes friends," then I will strive to become that.

So, I want more—

"Call me Hazuki."

I bite gently on Miyagi's ear.

"Hazuki."

"More."

"Hazuki."

With each call of my name, Miyagi's voice draws out the rational part of me hidden deep within, shattering it into pieces. The number of times my name was spoken equaled the extent of my rationality slipping away, until all of me began reaching for Miyagi.

Eyes, ears, arms, hands, and voice.

I wrap Miyagi in a sticky embrace of longing.

I want to soil Miyagi more. I want to make Miyagi even more mine.

To convey just how deeply I love her—even though she might not believe it—I want to express it.

Though I lacked the courage now, someday, somewhere, I want to say "I love you" until she becomes sick of it.

"Hazuki."

Her fingers pressed firmly, increasing in pace. My heat clung to Miyagi, threatening to dissolve her.

"…Shiori. I love that voice."

Even though I'm not able to speak freely, I voice a small part of my feelings, adding words to disguise the feelings I conveyed.

"So, call me more."

"Hazuki."

Although her touch hasn't lasted very long, the desire to touch and be touched by Miyagi has lingered within me for so long that my body is rising impatiently.

The dirtier Miyagi became, the more unbearable it felt.
I couldn't tell if I was inhaling or exhaling.
Short of breath, I call out for Miyagi.

Shiori, Shiori, Shiori.

On the brink of losing consciousness, I dug my nails into her back. Despite that, the vivid heat from our contact is undeniable, and it's as if Miyagi is melting into me, her outline dissolving within.

Hot, suffocating, and burning.

Everything wraps around me as one.

"Hazuki."

She whispers in my ear as if clinging to me, flooding me with pleasure, painting my vision white as I bite into Miyagi.

My strength is drained.
My breathing doesn't immediately steady.
My vision remains blurry.
Clothes lay discarded.

I reach out to Miyagi, lying beside me, and caress her cheek.

Meeting her gaze, she watches me steadily.

"You can do more if you want."

In a hoarse voice, I offer, and she replies, "That's enough."

"Is it okay if I touch you?"

"…Next time."

The unexpected response almost led me to ask "Eh?" again, but I swallow the words.

Asking again would render her previous words void.
Pushing for the promise would make her flee.

In this place important to me, where Miyagi lives.

Today doesn't have to be the day for doing things we couldn't do with anyone else.
Whether it's ten days later or a month from now, it's fine.
What's important is that a "next time" does come.

But even after "next time," I want to remain with Miyagi.

"So, can you grant me a request right now?"

"A request?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I want you to stay here, Shiori."

"What do you mean by—"

I grab Miyagi's hand just as she was about to object.

"This is a small request. Stay here a while longer."

Miyagi doesn't pull away.
So I kiss Miyagi's fingertips, which were stained with me.

Chapter 111

Today's Sendai-san is Known Only to Me (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 321

Sendai-san is always beautiful. Today, even while talking with Mio-san in this room, she looked stunning.

However, I think she looks even more beautiful when she's doing things she only does with me, or when she's sitting next to me, gazing solely at me.

I'm relieved that I didn't turn off the lights. I can see Sendai-san clearly as she lies down on the bed.

Her collarbone, her chest, her stomach. Illuminated by the light, she looks truly beautiful.

Though it concerns me that she can see my face as well, it's more important that I can see her. The Sendai-san here is exclusively mine, known only to me, so I must etch every detail, every part of her, into my memory.

And since she's right beside me, I should listen to her voice and feel her warmth.

"...Sendai-san."

Hazuki.

Perhaps I should call her that, but the time for calling her Hazuki has ended. It might not matter anymore, but if I were to call Sendai-san "Hazuki," then Maika would start calling her that too, and that is something I simply cannot allow.

Mio-san also calls Sendai-san "Hazuki," but she's done so since before I met her. It's distinctly different from Maika's case.

"Not Sendai-san; Hazuki," she corrects me with a dissatisfied voice.

"I won't call you that."

I could refrain from calling her Hazuki in front of Maika, but if I regularly called her that, I'd inevitably slip up in front of Maika one day. Thus, I want to reserve it for special occasions only.

"Sendai-san, let go of my hand."

She's been holding my hand the entire time.

"Why?"
"Because I want to wipe it."

I glance at my hand, which was damp with a large amount residue earlier, but is now starting to dry.

There's nothing dirty about the remnants left clinging to me from Sendai-san, nothing I feel the urgent need to wipe off. But if I touch her with this hand, I might sully her pristine form.

"Sendai-san."

I try to pull my captured hand toward me, but she doesn't release her grip.

"I won't let go."

Her quiet voice drifts to me. It's rare to see this side of her, and it's adorable.

"Why?"
"Because it's proof that Shiori touched me."

While looking into my eyes, Sendai-san openly states it, as if forgetting all sense of shame. From her perspective, it might be nothing more than "I answered because Miyagi asked," but there are moments when it's better to keep such thoughts locked away in one's heart.

"Stop with the Shiori already. Also, aren't you embarrassed saying things like that?"

"I am embarrassed, but if I don't say it, you'll wipe it off. If you find it unpleasant, you can wipe it, though."
"It's not unpleasant, but as long as it's there, I can't touch you, Sendai-san."
"I want to be touched like this."

Her sense of shame, which seems to wander off frequently, is still absent; presumably, her common sense is on some extended trip as well.

"I'll wipe it and then touch you."
"...Miyagi, just touch me as is."

It was I who banned the use of Shiori.

Yet being called Miyagi stings as if leaving a small wound in my chest. I fear that if I ignore it, it will fester, rot, and ultimately become so corrupt I'll no longer feel the pain, so I silently call her Hazuki in my heart.

Even though I see, hear, and feel this Sendai-san who is mine alone, it's not enough.

"Then... rock-paper-scissors. If you win, you can wipe your hand."
"I won't do rock-paper-scissors."
"If you won't, then just stay quietly a little while longer."

Rock-paper-scissors isn’t anything amusing.
Sendai-san uses unfair tactics to betray me.
Thus, it becomes impossible for me to trust her.

"I'll stay here, so let go of my hand."

Saying so, I gently kick her foot, and my trapped hand is freed.
I extend my hand and softly place it over her heart.

My own heart thumps loudly.
But I can't hear Sendai-san's heartbeat.

If I were to press my ear against her chest, I might hear it, but that would feel too much like coddling. Instead, I opt to press my hand firmly.

"Should we do it again?"

Sendai-san smiles gently.

"No."
"You're stingy, Miyagi."

I trace my hand from her heart up to her throat. When I quietly call out "Sendai-san," she replies "What," making her throat vibrate. The sensation of her voice on my fingertips is so delightful that I call out "Sendai-san" once more, prompting her to murmur "Miyagi" as her throat quivers beneath my caress.

"Miyagi, that tickles."
"Don't you want to be touched?"
"I want to be touched. I like it when you touch me, Miyagi."

Sendai-san states clearly, while watching me.
This kind of “like” from her is appealing, yet it also makes me anxious. Her expressions of like are usually vague, making me doubt if she genuinely feels that way.

"Please, say something, Sendai-san."
"Like what?"
"Anything is fine."
"Saying ‘anything’ is the most difficult, so make a specific request."
"Then, how about the recipe for hamburg steak?"
"Miyagi really loves hamburg steak, don't you?"
"What about you, Sendai-san?"
"I find it delicious, so yes, I like hamburg steak."

Sendai-san says she likes what I like, and wherever we go, she sees only me. She doesn't look at the fish at the aquarium, or the animals at the zoo. If asked, she would, but I don't believe that counts. She never seems genuinely interested by what surrounds her, and sometimes that scares me.

Sendai-san doesn't show much interest in her surroundings, no matter where she is. She looks at me as if to prove she’s solely mine.

I wish for her to be this way, yet I believe she shouldn’t always be like this.

"Sendai-san, tell me again how to make hamburg steak."

As I quietly trace the line of her throat, Sendai-san begins narrating the recipe, starting with the ingredients.

Her voice vibrates along her throat, resonating through my fingertips.
It's delightful to feel her throat vibrate for my ears alone.

I think Sendai-san should pick me from a wider selection of options.

Having likes and dislikes.
Having friends she cherishes.

Among several choices, she should choose solely me.

Otherwise, it frightens me.

The thought of being deemed uninteresting or insignificant by her makes me worry for the future.

Sendai-san isn't like my mother.
I know this well, but the thought of being abandoned one day fills me with dread.

I take my hand away from Sendai-san and lick my drying fingers.

"Hey, Miyagi. Stop, that's dirty."

Her explanation of the hamburg steak recipe pauses, overtaken by her complaint.

"It's fine, isn't it?"
"It's not."

At that, Sendai-san tightly grasps my hand.

"Let go."
"No way."

With a small voice, she brushes her lips against my fingertips.

It would be better for her to become a little more "normal."

Creating choices shapes who Sendai-san is.

"You’re always up to something strange, Sendai-san."
"So are you, Miyagi."

Just like I have my likes and dislikes, she should too—and she deserves to have friends.

Having Maika in my life has been a great comfort to me. I believe I should allow someone to occupy a similar place in Sendai-san's life.

However, I worry that if she becomes more "normal," she might find less value in me, and cease to be my Sendai-san alone.

While I am denying the Sendai-san that I desire and that only I can see, I am also denying the normal Sendai-san.

"Sendai-san, close your eyes."
"I don't have to close them for a kiss, do I?"
"I didn't say I was going to kiss you."
"Is that not what you're doing?"
"Just close them."

Compliantly, Sendai-san closes her eyes. I suppress the dissonance within my heart and press my lips to hers.

Today's Sendai-san is Known Only to Me (II)

Part 322

No matter how many times it happens, I can never get used to it.

What happened yesterday was something only my Sendai-san does with me. Maybe if I do more things like that with Sendai-san I'll get used to it one day, but I can't imagine doing something like that to the point where I get used to it.

The memory of Sendai-san in my mind isn't enough. I find myself dreaming about her, feeling that I never have enough of Sendai-san.

Mio-san and Maika came over, and I touched Sendai-san.

Because of the rare combination of events yesterday, I have become someone who can't forget the Sendai-san of yesterday, and I now want to know the version of Sendai-san that isn't just from yesterday.

I don't regret that, but I do regret calling Maika without thinking, prompted by Mio-san.

"What exactly was the kiss mark from Sendai-san?"

Maika asks with unconcealed curiosity.

Since this morning, she's been talking about what happened yesterday at every opportunity, and even now that we're in a café near the university, the topic hasn't changed.

I wish Maika's voice would get lost in the complaints about a lover coming from the seat behind us, but her voice wasn't going to get drowned out by the bustling noise inside the café, so I had to answer.

"I don't know. Maybe Mio-san just thought it was a kiss mark."

I reply with a plausible answer to her never-ending curiosity, even after university.

Yesterday, by inviting Mio-san, things I didn't want certain people to know got out. The talk about the kiss mark I left on Sendai-san was one of those things, but Maika persists in her curiosity.

All of it is due to my own doing and serves me right, but if I could, I'd erase everyone's memories.

"Well, when you put it that way, it makes sense. ...Shiori, you don't know anything about it?"

"I think it’s probably a burn, just as she said."

"Yeah, maybe. Sendai-san would definitely tell us if she had a boyfriend. If it was a kiss mark, it wasn't some boyfriend who left it. But Sendai-san isn’t the type to engage in such things lightly, right?"

"Right."

I answer quietly and sip on my iced tea. Touching the straw with the lips that wore the lip balm Sendai-san chose, I take a sip of the cold liquid.

Maika has no shift at her part-time job today and has a lot of free time. She's aware that Sendai-san is busy tutoring today and will be home late, so there’s no chance she’ll let me go easily.

Even though being in a house without Sendai-san is boring, today I want to go home as soon as possible. I don't like waiting, but if I wait, Sendai-san will return, which is much better than endless conversations like this.

"But you know, Mio-san doesn’t seem like the type to misjudge such things."

Across from me, Maika takes a small bite of her pancakes. Half the pancakes on the table have disappeared into her stomach, but the talk of kiss marks persists.

"Who knows. People can make mistakes. Speaking of which, Maika, why didn’t you tell me about the person at your part-time job?"

"The person from work? You mean the cool guy?"

"Yes. Do you have a crush on him?"

I look intently at the cheesecake and cut it with a fork. Just as I stab a piece and attempt to raise it to my mouth, Maika speaks.

"I told you yesterday; it’s not about wanting to date him, I think. It doesn’t really feel like a crush."

"Is that so? But you could've told me about it."

I take a bite of the cheesecake and gaze at Maika.

"Shiori, you’re not keen on these kinds of talks."

Well, she's right.

As Maika pointed out, I'm not really into topics like these.

I don't find it interesting to discuss who's cool, who's dating who, or when people ask, "What about you, Shiori?" It only turns into bothersome matters, so these are conversations I prefer to avoid.

"So, is there someone you’re interested in, Shiori?"

I expected this roundabout talk to lead back here, but it’s still better than continuing the talk about kiss marks.

"There’s no one in particular."

"Are you keeping it a secret?"

"I’m not hiding anything from you, Maika."

"But you hid about Sendai-san, didn’t you?"

Maika asks with a chuckle.

"…Sorry about that."

I do feel bad about keeping the fact that I shared a room with Sendai-san a secret.

I had thought at some point I'd need to talk about it, but there was too much to explain, and I couldn't bring it up on my own.

"Oh, you seem repentant."

"I'm serious; please forgive me."

There's no lie in my words.

My remorse is as deep as the sea.

"By the way, you haven't mentioned anything about Noto-san to Sendai-san, have you?"

Suddenly reminded, Maika grins.

"Ah, right."

Keeping secrets isn’t good.

When they come to light, it becomes a hassle, so it's better to talk about what you can.

That's how I feel, but some things remain unsaid. Because of Noto-san’s strange comments, I ended up hiding everything about her from Sendai-san.

"Wait, was it something you couldn’t tell Sendai-san?"

"Not really. I simply forgot."

The rules we established for living togther didn’t forbid keeping secrets.

So theoretically, there shouldn't be any issues, but secrets tend to invite lies. And they weigh on the heart.

"I think you're too secretive, Shiori. Sendai-san seems to be a worrier."

Maika's words cut deep into my chest.

It's so deeply embedded that it’s hard to pull out, making me want to collapse right here from the pain.

"I'll be careful from now on."

Noto-san's talk captured Sendai-san's attention, even though she usually seems uninterested in such matters. It's good that she takes an interest in me, but being so focused on Noto-san's nonsensical remarks is far from pleasing.

Still, I should have at least mentioned meeting Noto-san. It's become unnecessarily complicated because I didn't.

"And I also want you to talk to me about things. I'll share things about me too."

"Yeah, I'll talk."

Right now, I can't discuss what's happening between me and Sendai-san.

Yet, there's a part of me that wants Maika to know.

I want her to understand that Sendai-san is mine and that no one else marks her with kiss marks.

Perhaps one day with Maika—.

I don't know if that day will come, but I want to reduce the number of secrets.

"Alright, pinky promise."

Maika says, and I instinctively move my hand.

I almost reach for the earrings Sendai-san chose, but I stop.

The earrings, the promise, and the kiss.

I don't particularly want to kiss Sendai-san, but the thought of her and the kiss on the earring crosses my mind.

"I promise."

I tell Maika in as cheerful a voice as I can manage and take another bite of the cheesecake.

Chapter 112

I Only Need Miyagi and Me (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 323

"Sendai-chan, your face is scary," Noto-senpai says with a nonchalant tone, as if she hasn't considered my expression at all.

"I'm making it scary," I reply.

"And why is that?"

"Don't you have any idea?"

"An idea? Hmm, not really. Anyway, could you let go of my arm?"

She smiles pleasantly and nudges my hand.

I had heard about how Miyagi and Noto-senpai encountered each other at Utsunomiya's part-time job about a week ago. Since then, I've been reaching out to senpai, but although I've received replies, she hadn't provided an opportunity to meet, so I have no intention of letting go.

Miss this chance, and who knows when I'll next meet Noto-senpai, given her casual approach to scheduled meetings.

"I'm fine with letting go, but do you have a moment?" I ask.

"Oh, you did say you wanted to talk. Want to chat over something to drink somewhere?" she responds cheerfully, ready to walk with her arm still in my grasp.

I'm done with all my necessary lectures, so I have time. But the discussion I want to have isn't the kind meant to be had casually over drinks. Still, it's not one for a walk between school buildings, either.

In short, there's no ideal place for a conversation with Noto-senpai.

"Here is fine. It'll be a short conversation... You met with Miyagi, right?" I say, giving her arm a gentle tug.

"It's true," she responds, ruffling her hair as if suddenly recalling the meeting. "I met her at her friend's part-time job, but why does that matter?"

"What did you talk about?"

I had checked with Utsunomiya to see if Noto-senpai had previously visited her workplace, and aside from the incident I knew about, she had not.

So, there must be a reason for Noto-senpai's visit. She's not someone who acts on pure instinct, like Mio's simple enthusiasm for fun.

"You'd be better off asking Miyagi-chan directly."

"I did ask her. She said it was nothing significant."

"In that case, that's all there is to it. Just some small talk. We had a good time. Did Miyagi-chan say it was enjoyable?"

With a smile, senpai gently nudges my hand again, signaling me to finally release her arm.

"I haven't heard anything from Miyagi, so I'm not sure. But, senpai, you're sure it was just small talk with her?"

"Yes, just small talk."

"You're hiding something, right?"

"If that's the case, it might mean Miyagi-chan is hiding something from you too. Are you fine with that?"

"I don't like it, but it's fine."

In truth, I can't forgive the idea that Miyagi might have secrets she can't share with me. I want to know everything she's thinking, everything she's doing. Be it what she's up to at university or what she's doing at home when I'm working part-time—I want to hear all

of it from her.

But I know she won't tell me everything, just as I have things I can't tell her.

For instance, the fact that I love her.

That's something I can't bring myself to say.

"Sendai-chan, are you okay with that?" Noto-senpai asks to confirm my resolve.

"I am," I reply, and she looks at me intently.

"Miyagi-chan is certainly cherished," she says, in a tone devoid of mockery, yet it feels as if something intangible and unsettling is clinging to my back.

"...What are your intentions?" I ask, as I can't shake off this feeling.

Miyagi met with Noto-senpai. Miyagi kept it a secret. Neither sits well with me, which is why I sought to track down Noto-senpai—I doubt Miyagi would disclose what I want to know if confronted her directly.

Miyagi tends to hide "bad things." She wouldn't even tell me when she was unwell, and she would slip away and hide when inconveniences arose.

"Intentions?" she questions back, "If anything, it's for Mio's sake. She's been an important junior to me since she was in high school, after all."

"Mio? That has nothing to do with Miyagi," I retort.

"It might, or it might not," she ambiguously answers, beginning to walk.

I almost reach out again but stop myself, knowing her pace isn't that of someone attempting to escape.

"If Mio's that important, why not keep her on a leash or something?" I sarcastically suggest, matching her pace slightly behind her.

"I'm hardly going to leash her like a dog. So, Sendai-chan, is your couple's cohabitation with Miyagi-chan going well?"

"No need for concern there."

"So, it's going well then?"

The unsettling feeling resurfaces with Noto-senpai's words.

What is this tingling sensation on my spine?

Think, think, think.

"Or were you just roommates?" she splits my thoughts with her question, bringing me to a halt.

The word she uses remind me—it has been a while since I last heard that term.

The day Miyagi suddenly said she was "done being roommates."

On that day, Miyagi was acting strange. I've long suspected something was off, and now it seems that her meeting with Noto-senpai might be the reason.

Utsunomiya couldn't exactly recall when Noto-senpai visited, but if it was that day, everything begins to make sense.

"Are you listening, Sendai-chan?" Noto-senpai calls from ahead, looking back at me.

Our eyes meet.

Surely, Miyagi and senpai met on that day. I don't know what senpai told her, but it's definitely not good. This is something I cannot allow.

"Senpai, please stay away from Miyagi," I declare.

I've been grateful to Noto-senpai, but there are places she must not intrude.

"Does that mean it's fine to stay involved with you?"

"Keep things as they are with me. But stay away from Miyagi, please."

"There's no need to say it twice. I'll refrain."

Though her speech is monotonous and gives no indication of her thoughts, I can't bring myself to trust her words, so I reassert myself.

"Not just refrain—absolutely make sure not to get involved. If there are issues between Miyagi and me, we'll solve them ourselves."

"Interesting. So, there are issues between you two?"

I don’t sense any malice in her questioning. Nor do I think she intends to harm Miyagi.

However, my body moves instinctively, reaching out to grab Noto-senpai's arm.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you, Sendai-chan. Rest assured, I won't do anything bad to Miyagi-chan."

Noto-senpai peeled my fingers away from her arm one by one with a cheerful voice, saying, "I'm off now," and started to walk away. But then she stopped, turned around and looked at me.

"Oh, right, Sendai-chan."

"What is it?"

"Are you thinking about taking on more students?"

"Not at the moment."

"That's a shame. I've heard you have a good reputation," she smiles warmly, but I can't bring myself to reciprocate.

I probably don't look very good right now.

Yet Noto-senpai doesn't seem to mind at all. She waves off the tense atmosphere and departs, leaving me standing there.

What on earth is with that woman?

Is she just amusing herself, or does she have another purpose? I can't quite figure it out, but it's certainly not a pleasant feeling.

The issues between Miyagi and me are for us to deal with, and no one else should interfere. Even if we're stagnant or hit a wall, it's up to Miyagi and me to sort things out, whether we succeed or fail.

I exhale deeply.

I want to get home quickly. While I have no intention of discussing what just happened, I want to see Miyagi's face.

"...Let's head home," I murmur, turning on my heel to go to the place I should be. But before I can start walking, a lively voice breaks into my thoughts.

"Hazuki, I found you!"

Before I can utter, "Mio," she rushes towards me and grabs my arm the same way I had just done to Noto-senpai earlier.

"You haven't been checking your phone, have you?"

As I reach into my bag to pull out my phone at her accusing tone, she says, "Don't bother looking now. Just tell me if you're free."

"What if I am?" I reply, though I'm in a hurry now. I was free, but that moment has passed.

However, as a small penance for missing Mio's message, I feel obligated to hear her out.

"Hazuki, you look scary. You're in a bad mood, huh? Did something happen?"

"Not really... sorry."

Something did happen. But right now, the problem is more about being stopped from going home rather than what had happened. Of course, it's not Mio's fault, but the timing is just unfortunate—too unfortunate.

"Don't apologize. Let's grab an early dinner," Mio suggests.

I'm not feeling up to it. I just want to go home and see Miyagi.

"You can invite Shiori-chan, too."

Her cheerful suggestion rekindles a memory. Oh, that's right, Miyagi mentioned.

"Get along with Mio."

To earn Miyagi's trust, I need to be on good terms with Mio.

Despite this, I've kept declining Mio's invitations. I've asked her so many times about Noto-senpai that at least treating her to dinner as thanks would be right.

"Alright, dinner sounds good. Miyagi is probably busy, so let's go just the two of us. My treat."

"Yay!"

"Just give me a moment to send a message," I say, pulling out my phone from my bag.

I type, "Having dinner with Mio, so I'll be home a bit late," and send it. Almost instantly, Miyagi replies with an indifferent "Got it."

I Only Need Miyagi and Me (II)

Part 324

Miyagi is nowhere to be found.

Despite not having a part-time job or being a member of any clubs, I can't find her anywhere in the house.

Once again, I knock on the door of the room where it's strange for her not to be.

Knock, knock.

No voice comes from inside, nor any sound.

I press my ear against the door.
There's no sign of anyone being inside.
I check my phone.
There are no messages, just like the last time I looked.

When I told her I was going out to eat with Mio, Miyagi just replied with "Got it." She didn't send any messages saying she'd be late or had other plans. Of course, she didn't call me either.

I place my bag on the table in the shared space and sit down on a chair.

I send Miyagi a message, saying, "I've arrived home," and add, "Will you be late?" But, even after waiting a minute or two, there's no response.

I also send a message to Utsunomiya, asking if she knows where Miyagi is.

No reply.
Naturally.
Not even ten seconds have passed.

If I think calmly, there's nothing to be anxious about.

Anyone can go out with friends and return late, and sometimes they forget to contact you.

If Miyagi is with someone, it would likely be Utsunomiya, and perhaps they're having such a good time that neither has noticed my message. There's also her friend Asakura-san, and they might be hanging out and losing track of time.

If that were truly the case, I'd be pretty annoyed.

I slump my head onto the table, knocking my forehead against it.

But, what if.

Because I mentioned going out to eat with Mio, Miyagi might be in a bad mood and chose not to return home.

That's a possible scenario.
Miyagi told me to get along with Mio, but she also said it's irritating. So, it's not out of the question.

"Hmmm."

Even if that assumption is true, it's nearly impossible to get along with Mio without annoying Miyagi.

"It's impossible, right? But still..."

When Miyagi is displeased because I'm getting along with someone, it's incredibly cute. So much so that I just want to continue doing things that might annoy her.

However, more than seeing Miyagi like that, I want to be with her as always.
It's not that spending time with Mio isn't fun, but the time I spend with Miyagi just can't be beaten.

Miyagi is who I want to prioritize.

Yet, that wouldn't change anything. Maintaining the status quo won't earn Miyagi's trust, nor will it make me into the person she wants me to be.

If I could somehow erase everyone else from the world except for

Miyagi and me, that would be ideal, but if I had that kind of power, I would have done it already.

"Well, spending the day with Mio was worthwhile."

During our conversation, I got to learn more about Noto-senpai than ever before. While it may be questionable to be full of ulterior motives during the meal with Mio, it turned out to be quite rewarding.

It seems that Noto-senpai has been concerned about Mio's restless nature since high school and has even intervened in her social life.

Apparently, even now in university, Noto-senpai continues to fuss over Mio.

From what I gathered, it seems that Noto-senpai cares about Mio more than I had imagined.

"Is she wary, perhaps?"

I don't consider myself a suspicious person to be cautious of, but being close to Mio might have drawn her attention.

Back in high school, I would have acted to become likable to both Mio and Noto-senpai, but having now abandoned the idea of overly accommodating others, such relationships just seem tiresome.

"I don't get why she wants to drag Miyagi into this."

I let out a sigh and lift my head.

As I hold my phone, debating whether or not to contact Miyagi, a message arrives from Utsunomiya: "Shiori was at my place, but she just left." Shortly after, I hear Miyagi's voice echo in my ears.

"I'm home."
"Welcome back."

I stand up and firmly grip Miyagi's clothes, who appears uninterested in talking and tried to head straight to her room, guiding her to sit down on a chair.

"If you're going to be late, you should let me know."

I stand in front of her to prevent her from escaping.

"I assumed you'd be later since you were meeting with Mio-san."
"Even if you thought that, just inform me."
"Then, a penalty game."

Miyagi's voice is downright sullen when she says this.

"For me?"

I find this unfair.
We agreed to notify each other if we'd be late since we started living together, and this time, it's Miyagi who broke the rule. If there's a penalty game, it should be Miyagi, not me, who's doing something.

"Wrong."

Miyagi speaks with an even lower voice.

"What do you mean, wrong?"
"I'll do the penalty game. Is there something you want, Sendai-san?"
"Kiss me."
"Why would you answer that immediately? You're such an idiot, Sendai-san."
"There isn't anything else I want right now."
"Choose something else."
"Then tell me why you're in a bad mood."

Because I went to have dinner with Mio.

I hope that Miyagi will say that.
I want her to glare at me and admit she's jealous.

"It's not bad."

Miyagi quietly drops her gaze to the floor.
She won't bend to my desires.

But if she did, I'd worry something's wrong with Miyagi, so regardless of what she does, I'll accept her as she is.

Still, I feel like complaining, so I mutter, "It is bad," sensing Miyagi's low voice again.

"… I was just thinking you might have had fun with Mio-san."
"I only had dinner with her because you said to get along with Mio, Miyagi."

In response to her not hiding her bad mood, I say this, and Miyagi lifts her gaze to look at me.

"You only had dinner because I told you to?"
Her voice grows a little louder.
I made a mistake.
I probably said something unnecessary.

"Yeah. I also met Noto-senpai today."

Trying to change the topic, which promises no good outcome, I blurt out something I hadn't planned to say.

"… Oh, really? Did Noto-san say anything?"
"She said it was fun meeting with you."
"Oh. And you, Sendai-san? Did you have fun?"
"Meeting with Noto-senpai?"
"No. Having dinner with Mio."

Miyagi returns the conversation to its original topic.
Today's Miyagi isn't a good version of herself.

"So-so."

My curt response prompts Miyagi to tap her toe against my foot.

"Does Mio-san usually invite others when eating with Sendai-san?"
"Sometimes, but today it was just Mio."
"Okay."
"Would it be better if I don't meet with Mio?"
"I didn't say that. I want you to get along with just Mio-san and no one else."

It's not amusing.
This isn't enjoyable.
Miyagi isn't saying anything pleasant.

I want Miyagi to tell me, "Don't meet with Mio." But that is something she'll never say.

I understand.
I have to get along with Mio.

“I’ll make sure to get along with Mio.”

I gently reach out to Miyagi and touch the plumeria earrings. I lean in closer, moving away just before my lips can reach them.

These earrings have a meaning.

If there ever comes a time when Miyagi loves someone else, I want these earrings to wish for her happiness in my place.

The earrings, which symbolize the wish for a loved one's happiness, carried those sentiments when I gave them to her. But right now, I can't even allow the earrings to wish for Miyagi's happiness with someone else.

The earrings should wish for me to be the one who makes Miyagi happy.

"Miyagi, as I mentioned before, choose a pendant for me. It could be a necklace if you like."

On my ears, I wear the earrings Miyagi chose.

However, I don’t think they carry as much 'weight' as the ones I gave Miyagi. I don't expect our feelings to be perfectly balanced, but Miyagi should direct a bit more 'sentiment' toward me.

“...I’ll choose, but give me some time.”

Uncharacteristically, Miyagi accepts my words straightforwardly.

“How long is ‘some time’?”
“I don’t know, but I will definitely buy it.”
“Let me know when you do. I’ll pay for it.”
“No, I'll choose it and I’ll buy it. Then Sendai-san will wear it. But in exchange for me choosing a necklace, there’s one condition.”
“What is it?”
“When you meet Mio-san, listen to one thing I say that day.”
“Alright. Should I start listening today?”

If it’s Miyagi’s request, I’ll listen twice or even three times over. I’ve followed numerous orders from her in the past.

“Today, swear on the earrings that on days when you see Mio-san, you’ll listen to what I say.”

“Understood.”

I touch Miyagi's earrings, repeating the words she uttered. Then, instead of kissing the earrings, I kiss her lips.

I place a light, slow kiss before pulling away.

Though Miyagi knits her brow, she doesn't voice any complaints. Her toe taps against my foot harder than before.

“There’s one more thing I have to say.”

Miyagi says in a flat voice, looking at me.

“What is it?”
“I’m getting a part-time job.”
“Eh? Who is?”
“I am.”
“...Huh?”

My mind completely stops processing the words I never expected to hear from Miyagi.

Chapter 113

Not Telling Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 325

On the table sat Sendai-san's bag. I looked up and see Sendai-san's face, devoid of expression.

Though not quite ominous, the atmosphere in the shared space wasn't the best.

"Part-time job? Miyagi? You're joking," Sendai-san said in an emotionless voice, standing in front of me.

"It's not something to joke about."

"...It's weird. The Miyagi I know wouldn't get a job."

"Even I can get a part-time job. I'm a college student, and Maika has one too."

Everyone was working part-time jobs. It was not just Maika; even Asakura-san was working, and indeed, Sendai-san herself was working one. Hence, there was no reason why it should be strange for me to work part-time.

—Although I'm not too keen on it.

"Did Utsunomiya invite you or something?"

"No, she didn't."

"Then who invited you?"

"No one invited me."

I stated firmly, and suspicion was cast in my direction. But truly, no one had invited me. It was my own decision to work part-time.

"...What's the reason for getting a job?"

I heard her probing for my real intentions.

"Because I want money."

"That's not it. I want to know what you plan to do with the money you earn from the job. Is there something you want?"

Sendai-san's voice grew stronger, almost to the point of being overbearing, and the word "interrogation" came to mind.

In this scenario, Sendai-san was the detective, and I was the suspect.

Yet, I'd done nothing wrong.

"I don't have to tell Sendai-san."

"Why not? You could tell me. Or is it something you can't share?"

Though it wasn't something significant to hide, I had my reasons for wanting to keep what I would do with the money a secret. If I revealed it, the intended purchase might become too much and impossible to give her.

"...It doesn't matter."

I want to make it clear that I belong to Miyagi.

The words she once said lingered in my mind.

On the day we went to the aquarium, she wore the necklace I had given her when we were in high school as a "mark," and when I suggested she should choose a more fashionable necklace, she replied, "Miyagi should choose."

Since then, I've wanted Sendai-san to wear a new necklace as a clear indication of "belonging to me."

And if I were to purchase such a thing, I believe it should be with my own money, not the money I received from my father.

"It's bothers me when you hide things. Tell me."

"It's nothing special."

Absolutely, I had no desire to reveal it. Once spoken, there'd be no turning back.

I had declared I'd work part-time, but deep down, I doubted if I was cut out for it, and I hesitated about giving an item for Sendai-san to wear.

Surely, there must be something more suitable for her than what I'd choose.

Even with something like earrings, if someone else picked them, I'm sure they'd suit Sendai-san better than my choice. I lack confidence in what I choose.

Nonetheless, since I asked Sendai-san to get along with Mio-san, I need to provide a sign of "belonging to me" when she meets with Mio-san.

"If you want something, you could use that money."

Sendai-san suggested something to make me waver in my resolve.

“That money” was essentially the collection of five-thousand-yen bills I had handed Sendai-san when we were in high school. But I don’t think “that money” should be for me to use.

While I did hand it over, it originally came from my father, and it's Sendai-san who saved it. A purchase made with such money wouldn't be appropriate as a mark. Therefore, if I intend to give Sendai-san a necklace, I'll have to work part-time, whether I like it or not.

"I won't. I don't want to use it."

Knowing that Sendai-san was going to have dinner with Mio-san today annoyed me. Throwing past promises in the trash, I felt like I wanted to pretend I'd never told her to befriend Mio-san.

I needed something to deal with this feeling.

"Have you decided where to work?"

"No."

"Then why not work part-time together?"

Sendai-san took a step closer to me while I was seated.

Standing as if to block my path, the already short distance between us grew even smaller. Today, Sendai-san was a bit intimidating, making me want to flee. But with her standing before me, escaping was impossible.

"I'll work by myself."

"Why not work at a place where we can work together? You haven't decided on a workplace yet, right?"

"I won't work with you. Step back a little, will you?"

"Then you back off, Miyagi."

"While sitting in the chair?"

"Yes."

"That's impossible. You can see that, right?"

"I can't."

Sendai-san grasped my hand. Our eyes met, and she squeezed my hand with a tightness that was slightly painful.

"Let go."

"...If you want me to let go, then give up on the idea of a part-time job."

I found myself receiving what I had often said to Sendai-san before.

I am different from Sendai-san. Being told to give up on the job makes me want to back out.

I never really wanted a part-time job. The part of me looking for an out emerged, whispering in my ear, "Who cares if it's not your own

money?"

My resolve, as fluffy and soft as cotton candy, could easily melt away.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san softly called my name and tightened her grip on our clasped hands. I pulled hard, making her lose balance and grab the backrest of the chair I was sitting on.

Closing the distance between us, I sealed her lips with a kiss.

For two or three seconds.
Just for the span of a moment that felt unsatisfyingly short, I kissed her, then pulled away.

"Let me work part-time. After all... I'm letting you work part-time too, aren't I?"

I forced her hand free and pushed against her stomach.

Our distance increased again, and a sulky voice retorted, "I suppose so."

I thought that I might not need her permission after all. However, when Sendai-san had decided to work part-time, she sought my approval, so I reciprocated the gesture.

"If you have complaints, then you should quit your job too, Sendai-san."

The discontent isn't limited to you, Sendai-san.

I have my grievances too, and all along, I haven't been able to embrace the idea of your part-time jobs; I've wanted them gone.

Though I've come to accept the idea of Sendai-san meeting her tutoring students.

It irritates me, though.

I would prefer if she never meets those so-called tutoring students.

Still, I've been tolerating Sendai-san's work.

"Say something, Sendai-san."

I lightly kicked Sendai-san's leg, prompting her to respond.

"...Alright, I'll allow you to work, but only if you give me another kiss. A proper one," she said, reluctantly, grabbing my arm.

"What does 'proper' mean?"

I wondered how to handle it when there was a 'proper' condition attached to a kiss.

I knew the answer, but I asked anyway, only to receive a response that didn't amuse me: "Do you want to know?" That's the kind of reply I got. Sendai-san tends to mess around at times like these, so before she could do something trivial, I firmly stepped on her foot. Then, I stood up and kissed her soft-looking lips.

Sendai-san's arms wrapped around my waist, drawing our bodies together.

I hadn't given her permission to do anything, yet she pressed her lips against mine, so I lightly bit down with my teeth, careful not to cause any harm.

But Sendai-san didn't pull away. If anything, the harder I bit down, the closer she pressed against me.

Pushing open my slightly parted lips, I let the tip of my tongue touch hers. It was a soft, springy sensation as our tongues entwined.

Allowing just a bit of heat to exchange, I pulled back from the kiss.

"Not enough," Sendai-san muttered under her breath.

"Doesn't matter if it's not enough. I'm going to my room."

As I tried to move past her, she grabbed my arm.

"Miyagi, how long will you be working this job?"

"I don't know."

"Haven't you decided?"

"I'll decide later."

"You always have no plan, don't you?"

Sounding exasperated, Sendai-san released my hand, but only to intertwine her fingers with mine like our tongues had moments ago. Because of this, I couldn't head to my room.

"Not always."

I responded in a low voice and attempted to pull my hand away, but she wouldn't let go.

"Will you be working during summer vacation too? I wanted to know your plans."

"Plans?"

"In case you have free time."

"What if I do?"

"I was thinking we could go somewhere during summer break. Next year looks like it will be busy for us."

Her unexpected suggestion made the tension leave my grip.

"Where would we go?"

"Somewhere like a hot spring for a couple of days."

"No way."

A hot spring was absolutely out of the question.

"Why not?"

"Because hot springs mean bathing."

"Well, yes, that's true. Is that a problem?"

"It is. Sendai-san, you'd insist on us bathing together."

"It's normal to bathe together at a hot spring."

She said it as if it were a given, so I glared at her.

"It's not normal for me."

To bathe, you'd have to be naked. Being in a vulnerable state around Sendai-san was impossible for me.

"Okay, then it doesn't have to be a hot spring. Let's just go somewhere."

"As long as you don't decide on the place by yourself, fine."

"Got it. We'll decide together."

With that, Sendai-san leaned in to kiss me again, as if it were a matter of course, so I firmly stepped on her foot.

Not Telling Sendai-san (II)

Part 326

Working a part-time job is impossible. I don’t want to do it. Yet, if I don't, I can't buy the necklace.

Heaving a sigh, I lie back on the bed. I place the black cat plushie Sendai-san whimsically named “Roro-chan” on my stomach and sigh again.

It's been over a week since I declared to Sendai-san that I would get a job. Yet, not only have I not secured a place to work, I haven't even started the search.

I've got the motivation, but the courage seems to have run away and hasn't come back. No—it's as if the motivation chased after the courage and disappeared somewhere, too.

Today, Sendai-san, who tried to stop me from getting a job, is coming home late. She's tutoring a student, or something, for her part-time job. Unlike me, she appears to handle her self-chosen job with ease, without any struggle.

"Can you teach me how to get a job?”

I tug at the arm of the silent black cat. I know how to look for part-time work. I could search the bulletin board at the university, or look at job listing sites. I could also get a referral from a friend.

There are many ways to go about it, but I don’t feel like doing any of them. Essentially, I’m trying to distance myself from the act of working.

The necklace could probably be bought after about a month of work. Surely, if I worked for two months, that would be more than enough. Sendai-san wouldn't accept something ridiculously expensive, so it's not necessary to take a long-term job.

Considering the duration, working shouldn't be that difficult. I just need to endure for a little while.

Yet, I don't want to do it.

Not buying the necklace is out of the question, but whenever I think about working, my mood plummets at the speed of light.

I wish my replica could work on my behalf, yet that version of myself would undoubtedly be just as reluctant, insisting she doesn't want to work.

I stroke the black cat's head and place it next to the pillow. Turning over, I gaze at the ceiling.

How can I manage to work when neither I nor my replica can be relied upon?

A big sigh escapes my lips, and the sound of a soft knock on the door echoes in my ears.

I get up, climb off the bed, and open the door.

“Welcome back.”

I greet Sendai-san, who seems to have returned from her part-time job. She responds with “I’m home,” then asks, “Miyagi, have you had dinner?”

“I have. What about you?”

“I’m thinking of boiling some pasta. Want some too?”

“I’d gain weight if I ate more.”

“Alright. I’ll make some tea, so come join me.”

“No need. Go ahead and eat, Sendai-san.”

Today, I’m not in the mood to talk to Sendai-san about work.

Being around her might make me dwell on the job situation, which I’d rather not think about. I had wanted her to return soon, but since I’ve seen her face and heard her voice, that’s enough.

"How about some ice cream, then?"

Sendai-san smiles, mentioning something we don't have in our freezer.

"There's no ice cream here."

"But I bought some. Want any?"

"...Are you trying to tell me something?"

Whenever Sendai-san is this insistent, it usually means something is up. I can predict it won't be anything enjoyable for me, so my voice instinctively lowers.

"Did you change Roro-chan's spot? She was on the bed last time too."

With that, Sendai-san points inside my room. I almost turn around but hold still.

"I didn't change it."

Caught up in thinking about the job, I forgot to move the black cat back to the bookshelf. As she pointed out, the plushie is indeed on the bed.

It really infuriates me.

Sendai-san notices insignificant things she doesn't need to.

"Roro-chan is usually on the bookshelf, right? If you didn't change its spot, why is it on the bed?"

"Well... I was just checking if it was dusty."

"But it's black; it's hard to tell even if it is dusty, right?"

With Sendai-san commenting on such trivial matters and glancing around the room, I step decisively into the shared space and shut the door.

"Is the conversation about the plushie, Sendai-san?"

"No, come here, even if you don't want tea."

Softly smiling, Sendai-san grabs my wrist. Tugged along, I shuffle over and slump into a chair.

After she steps away, she takes a pot from the shelf. As she fills the pot with water, she speaks up. “So, about this…”

“What?”

“How’s the job search going?”

“How’s it going?”

She places the water-filled pot on the stove and lights the burner. While preparing pasta and sauce, she casually asks, “Have you decided on a job yet?”

“Not yet.”

“I see... Are you seriously planning to work?”

Sendai-san addresses the question to the pot rather than facing me. I can’t tell what expression she's wearing, with her back turned.

“Why do you ask?”

“It’s just that it wouldn’t be bad if you didn’t find one... No, I was kidding. Do you want help looking for one?”

Sendai-san offers quietly.

“I’m fine. I’ll look for one myself.”

Both working and searching are uncharted territories for me. It’s a bit disheartening to try something new.

Yet, I don’t want to depend on Sendai-san.

Since it’s like a plan to buy something for her, having her involved feels wrong.

“Miyagi.”

Sendai-san turns to face me.

“What?”

“Do you know you can find jobs at university?”

“I do. Do you think I’m a child or something, Sendai-san?”

“It’s not that, I'm just... a little concerned.”

“About what?”

“Various things.”

“Like what?”

“Whether you’d pick some weird place to work. Also, you know…”

She trails off.

“What else?”

“...Whether you’d meet someone strange, perhaps.”

“Don’t worry about it, you just focus on the boiling water, you’re making pasta, right?”

“The water is still fine.”

Sendai-san looks at me intently, instead of the pot. I can’t read her thoughts just by her expression, but it doesn’t seem like she’s lying about being worried.

“Sendai-san. I’m going to take a bath.”

Even if she's worried, my plan doesn't change, but knowing she's worried makes me want to lean on her.

“All of a sudden?”

“It’s about that time, and there’s nothing left to talk about.”

I’ve procrastinated enough, it’s high time I start the job search. If I don’t, summer vacation will arrive with no progress at all.

Turning away from Sendai-san, I return to my room. I place the black cat on the bookshelf and check my phone. I realize it’s not the best method.

“—Mio-san.”

Last time she came over, she talked about part-time jobs. Although the cafe job Mio mentioned seems unsuitable for me, she has an extensive network of contacts. If I tell her I’m looking for a job, she might introduce me to something.

I considered asking Maika for help, but if I did, I’d probably end up selling hamburgers with her, which I didn’t want. Comparing myself to Maika, who would be working cheerfully, would only make me feel worse.

"…For now, a bath."

Whether or not to contact Mio-san could be decided later.

I could soak in the bath and think it over leisurely. It wouldn't be too late to decide if I wanted to leave my fate in Mio-san's hands after some contemplation.

With that in mind, I gathered my change of clothes and headed to the bathroom.

Not Telling Sendai-san (III)

Part 327

After a long hour spent in the bath deep in thought, I find myself still lost in a maze of indecision.

Alone in my room, my brows furrow deeply, yet no conclusion emerges. Fifteen minutes have passed since I typed out "I have something to discuss" on my phone, sitting on the edge of my bed. Yet, I'm unable to press the send button.

If I send this message to Mio-san, it would be impossible to escape from the part-time job.

Even if, in a moment of weakness, I asked her to pretend I never brought it up, she would insist on knowing what I wanted to discuss and wouldn't let it go. This would inevitably lead to talking about the job.

Perhaps I should just give up.

I toss my phone aside and lie back on my bed. The plush comforter tempts me to forget everything and just fall asleep. Unlike Sendai-san, the soft duvet doesn't speak a word, but it directly appeals to my body, promising comfort.

Maybe if I sleep deeply until morning, I'll wake up feeling different.

The part-time job might seem unnecessary, and my desire to contact Mio-san may turn out to be just a fleeting whim.

The comforter is kinder than Sendai-san and more indulgent in letting me slack off. Resisting my lazy self hardly seems worthwhile.

If I let go of the part-time job and surrender to the comforter, nobody would complain. Even Sendai-san suggested giving up on it, so she might actually be pleased.

—Although the job is meant to buy an item showing that "Sendai-san belongs to me," specifically a necklace confirming that "My

Sendai-san" is indeed mine.

I gently touch the comforter.

So far, I've done things with Sendai-san that she never does with anyone else.

I’m the only one who needs to have those moments with her.

Thus, I definitely need the necklace. I believe I have to mark Sendai-san as mine.

I sit up and grab my phone.

I’m uncertain whether it’s wise to discuss the part-time job with Mio-san, who is close with Sendai-san. I wonder if it might make things complicated.

Still, I don’t know anyone else who could introduce me to a job. And when I try to find one on my own, my weaker self appears and stops me from moving forward, so I must choose a method that forces me to take steps forward.

I summon the courage to move my unwilling fingers, and send the maybe-best-left-unsent message to Mio-san.

Breathing in and out, a minute later, the phone rings.

"Eh?"

Mio-san's name dances across my phone screen, prompting me to jump up. Well, it doesn't actually dance, but it seems to sway cheerfully.

“…Why is she calling?”

Staring at the phone singing merrily for several seconds, the ringtone doesn’t stop.

It appears that giving up isn’t an option for Mio-san.

“...Hello?”

Bracing myself, I answer the call, hearing Mio-san’s cheerful voice

from the phone.

“Hey, hey, hey, Shiori-chan. Thanks for reaching out! I never thought Shiori-chan would rely on me, so I'm thrilled and had to call. I’ve got time now, so I can talk for however long you need, whether it's an hour or two. So, what do you need to talk about?”

Long-winded.
Her greeting is longer than anyone I know.
Moreover, I detect an ominous overture to a lengthy conversation.
Thanks to which, I’m already beginning to regret reaching out to Mio-san.

“Oh, uh, this could have just been done through text.”

“You mentioned having something to discuss, so I thought talking directly would be better. Some things are hard to convey in writing. Speaking in person, you can get into details and express your feelings properly right?”

“Well, that’s true.”

“Oh, is this maybe something hard to talk about?”

“It’s not that.”

Honestly, a consultation is more effective verbally, and feelings are conveyed better that way, so she isn’t wrong.

From my perspective, Mio-san’s energy is over the top, but there’s no teasing tone in her voice. It seems like she's genuinely willing to help with my consultation.

However, a phone call is not great.

“Is it just me, or is your voice really quiet, Shiori-chan?”

Mio-san says loudly, but it's unavoidable. Sendai-san is in the next room.

It’s something I don't want Sendai-san to know about. If my voice is heard, nothing good will happen.

Though, talking in a normal voice shouldn’t carry through. But my

voice just ends up being softer.

“It’s late, and I don’t want to disturb the neighbors.”

I tell her in a hushed tone.

“Well, it’s past eleven, so yeah. Anyway, what’s the issue?”

“Well…”

The words ‘part-time job’ simply refuse to roll off my tongue.

My resolve is so fragile, I lean against the wall dividing this room and Sendai-san’s. Although I don’t want Sendai-san on the other side to hear, my will to pursue a job strengthens when I’m near the wall close to her.

“...Um, it's about a part-time job.”

“Oh, oh? Shiori-chan, you want to work a part-time job?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it for the cafe job we talked about last time when we hung out?”

“Well, about that…”

“Huh? So, it's not the cafe job?”

“Could you introduce me to a job where I don’t have to fake smile?”

“…What kind of job is that?”

Mio-san asks, and I request a job where I don’t need a phony smile. I also add that such smiles don't suit me.

“Got it. Customer service isn’t your thing, huh.”

Mio-san murmurs thoughtfully.

What came to mind when I decided to work a part-time job was the high school cultural festival.

Back then, our class ended up doing a cafe, and I was forced into a

waitress role.

I somehow managed to fulfill the very unamusing role of taking orders with a smile and delivering them with a smile, but because of that cultural festival, my distaste for part-time jobs deepened.

Even after starting college, I was adamant about not working a part-time job.

That's what high school me thought.
But the future has changed.

"Is there such a job?"

Now, I'm willing to work a part-time job, even if customer interaction isn't for me.

"Shiori-chan. How long are you planning to work part-time?"

"... One week."

"That's short! Too short, isn't it?"

"Actually, I was hoping for about a month."

"Still pretty short-term, but if it's a month, why not work at my cafe?"

"I don't think I can handle dealing with customers."

Claiming I could do something I know I can't leads to nothing good. Even if I can't find a job, honesty is the best policy.

"Then how about working behind the scenes instead of as front-of-house staff?"

Mio-san suggests as if she's had a great idea.

"You mean like cooking?"

"Yes."

"I'm not good at cooking."

“Even as kitchen staff, you don’t have to make anything difficult, plus there’s dishwashing and other tasks, so I think it’s doable. Also, since we’re recruiting for front-of-house staff, if we're short on hands you might have to help with taking orders and carrying food, but you can be assisted in those times by someone else.”

Mio-san, undoubtedly smiling broadly on the other side of the phone, suggested the cafe part-time job, without any malicious intent, even though I said I didn't want to do customer service. I don’t think she’d deceive me by hiring me as kitchen staff then have me work in the front.

But I’m not enthusiastic about it.

As I remain silent, Mio-san, in her cheery voice, said, "I'll need to check with my aunt, though. —Ah, my aunt is the cafe manager. So if you're interested in giving it a try, I can ask her. What do you think?"

Mio-san is not a bad person.
Talking with her, I understand why she gets along well with Sendai-san.

—Though it's not particularly amusing.

But right now isn’t the time to be pondering my relationship with Sendai-san.

"…I'm not certain I'll do it, but could you ask anyway?"

"Sure thing. I’ll check it out. Personally, I'd love for you to work in the hall."

Mio-san said cheerfully, following up with, "Anything else you wanna discuss?"

"Not really discuss, but could you keep this from Sendai-san for now?"

"Why?"

"I’d prefer to keep it a secret until the part-time job is confirmed," I reply, a little hastily.

"Gotcha. Then I'll do my best to keep quiet."

"What do you mean by 'do my best'?"

"Well, I do tend to have a bit of a loose tongue. But since it's a request from Shiori-chan, I'll do my best to keep it quiet."

Hearing this over the phone makes me uneasy.
I might have chosen the wrong person to confide in, but it's too late to turn back, and I don't intend to.

"I trust you, Mio-san."

"Leave it to me! I'll talk to my aunt about the job, and I'll get back to you when things progress."

"Alright. Thanks for talking with me today."

"I can still talk for an hour or two, you know."

"I have nothing more to discuss, so it's fine."

I utter words to conclude our conversation. I feel a bit bad for Mio-san, but if I don't wrap up, I fear she really might go on talking for an hour or two.

"Okay then. Feel free to rely on me anytime. I'll be here for you."

With that, Mio-san said, "See you" and willingly ended the call.

Chapter 114

Words I Don't Want to Hear from Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 328

I just can't come to terms with it. Why? Why, oh why? —Why is Miyagi taking a part-time job?

I walk along the sidewalk, dyed by the evening glow. The wind, neither warm nor cold, blows through, ruffling my hair.

I march forward with a stomp, as if to split the sidewalk tiles in half, heading home with determination.

"Mio-san introduced me to a job," read the message from Miyagi that arrived as I swayed on the train heading to the university this morning. As soon as I arrived on campus, Mio casually dropped, "I went ahead and introduced Shiori-chan to a part-time job."

While I could anticipate what those words might lead to, I still sought more details. I discovered that Miyagi's new workplace was the same cafe where I had worked part-time and where Noto-senpai frequently came as a regular.

Why did Mio do something so unnecessary?

I almost confronted her, but somehow managed a smile and replied, "Oh, I see." However, I couldn't find it in myself to enjoy spending time with the one who introduced that job, nor could I accept her invitation to dine together.

With June having passed its midpoint, July is fast approaching.

Engaged in busy days, summer vacation is bound to arrive in the blink of an eye. I had planned to arrange holiday plans with Miyagi soon. Yet, before that happened, I never expected to hear about Miyagi's job situation and feel so shocked.

It's been over two weeks since she mentioned taking a job, and with no progress made, I assumed she had given up on the idea.

I must hurry home.

There's so much I want to say to Miyagi. For starters, having my friend Mio introduce her to a part-time job is itself absurd.

Even though Mio mentioned job opportunities when she visited, that's irrelevant. Since Mio is my friend, Miyagi shouldn't have approached her without at least telling me first.

Moreover, if Mio was going to help Miyagi find a job, she should have sought my approval.

I was angry at both Miyagi and Mio.
As dusk fell on the city, I drew closer to home.
I couldn't see the passing scenery.
My narrowed field of vision only sees the path leading to Miyagi.

I know full well that Miyagi and Mio owe me no explanations. Yet, my inability to accept this spurs my steps to quicken.

Upon ascending to the third floor, I stand before the entrance, drawing a deep breath, exhaling, and giving my cheeks a slap.

I steady myself before unlocking the door.

Inside, Miyagi's shoes are neatly lined up. I place mine next to hers and stride into the shared space.

Miyagi is nowhere in sight. After setting my bag in my room, I proceed to knock on Miyagi's door.

Two gentle taps. A brief pause, and the door opens slightly.

"…Welcome back," she says, avoiding my gaze.

"I'm home. Can I come in?" I ask.
"What if I say no?"
"Then, come out to the shared space," I reply, aware of the hint of discontent in my voice.

"...Come in," she answers reluctantly, throwing the door wide open. Her tone makes it clear that I'm an unwelcome guest, yet staying out isn't an option.

I settle into my usual spot and watch Miyagi as she closes the door and grudgingly sits down next to me.

"So, I heard you're starting a job where Mio works," I state, fixing my gaze on her.

"Mio-san told Sendai-san, huh," she mutters, displeasure evident in her small voice.

"Mio said, 'Shiori-chan wanted to keep it a secret from Hazuki until she landed the job. Isn't that adorable?'... She also mentioned, 'I did as Shiori-chan instructed and kept it secret until I heard back about the job, isn't that commendable?' "

I relay what Mio shared with me earlier that morning. Miyagi's forehead creases with a frown, but she says nothing more, simply staring at the floor with her brows furrowed.

Determined to address the matter in person, I voice the words I had intended to send as a message.

"Hey, Miyagi. Isn't it strange for you to work part-time?" I ask.
"What's so strange about it?" she counters.
"When I invited you to work with me over winter break, you said you weren't cut out for it."
"At that time, I replied that if it were with Sendai-san, I wouldn't work together," she retorts seamlessly, as if rehearsed.

For some reason, Miyagi is resolute about working.

Although I don't want her to take on a job, it's evident that convincing her otherwise will be difficult. I had anticipated the need to accept her decision to work. I'm willing to take a step back and allow her to work.

However, I want her to change where she'll work. That cafe is out of the question. There are various reasons.

Noto-senpai's status as a regular poses an issue, and I don't want Mio witnessing a side of Miyagi that I'm unaware of. Plus, the cafe has

patrons who persistently try to extract our contact info.

"…Does cafe work suit you?" I inquire about Miyagi's suitability for the job.
"I'm not sure, but since it's back in the kitchen and I don't have to be out front, it's doable."
"In that case, why not choose the kitchen at another cafe?"
"I've already made up my mind, and it's too late to change. Canceling now would inconvenience Mio-san."
"That's true, but... I'll apologize to Mio on your behalf, so let's find another job. I'll help you look," I offer.
"No need. I'll decide my own job," Miyagi states firmly, meeting my gaze.

Her resolve is unwavering. Resigned, I voice another concern.

"...Why did you turn to Mio for job help?" I ask.
"I didn't have anyone else to rely on," she replies.
"What about me? I could've introduced you to a job as well."
"If I asked you, you'd insist on working together."
"Is that really not possible?" I press.
"It's no good," she insists, just as she had last year when I suggested job-hunting together, her words cutting deeper than she knows.

I'm accustomed to being turned down by my parents, even by my sister. Rejection is something I take in stride. No matter how vast the gap becomes, I rarely feel the urge to fill it.

Just accept the facts calmly and wait for tomorrow.
As time passes, the deepened rift will fade into the darkness and disappear.

But I don't want to be rejected by Miyagi.

No refusal or rejection. I don't want any words that push me away. I'm not one to be hurt by what anyone says—only Miyagi's words can pierce me deeply, drawing blood.

"Please, don't tell me it's no good," I implore.

While many might tell me those words, today the "no good" is unbearable. I grasp onto Miyagi's hand, tightly, unwavering.

"It's alright if we don't work together or if you have a job, but stop

saying it's no good," my voice is quieter than I'd imagined.

I still dislike Miyagi's chosen job, but above all, I don't want her to reject me.

"...I don't want Sendai-san seeing me struggle through my weaknesses," Miyagi admits, her grip on my hand firm as she reveals why she wishes not to work together.

Although Miyagi showing her emotions openly like this is rare, there's no gentleness to it. The words that follow are far from considerate, making me want to block them out.

"Sendai-san, let me be clear. Don't ever come to the cafe when I'm working."

"If you're in the kitchen, it should be fine for me to visit," I argue.

"No."

Her "reason" was something I could understand.

Not wanting someone to see you struggle is a feeling not limited to Miyagi. It's not something I find entirely unacceptable. But even so, I can't bring myself to accept Miyagi's request.

"I want to go."

Talking like this reminds me of the high school cultural festival.

Back then, Miyagi's class organized a cafe, and when I mentioned, "Maybe I'll drop by to see you as a waitress," she told me not to come.

"Absolutely not. You're being too selfish today, Sendai-san."

"But you're being selfish too. You came to see me when I was working."

"That's different."

Reflecting on it now, I realize I should have gone to see Miyagi no matter what. I should have gone to her class, ignoring Umina if necessary.

I don't want to repeat not seeing Miyagi during the cultural festival.

"Okay," I concede, just for now.

I utter words meant only to defuse the situation.

Words I Don't Want to Hear from Miyagi (II)

Part 329

It was dissatisfaction. That was the expression Miyagi had on her face as she sat next to me.

"…Sendai-san, promise me."

That I won't visit the café when Miyagi is working there.

The purpose of the promise is to solidify that commitment.

Ever since I came to this room, Miyagi has only been saying unpleasant things. Although I would like to hear something more enjoyable, considering the circumstances, it's unlikely, so the words I should say are obvious.

"I promise. I won't go to see you while you're working, Miyagi."

—Although, I might still go to see Mio.

I silently added that in my heart and kissed her earring.

"Sendai-san, promise me for real," Miyagi reiterated her demand. Instead of verbally assuring her again, I smiled, causing her tense expression to soften slightly. Yet her face hinted at skepticism, still doubting whether to trust me or not. My credibility seems to plummet whenever part-time work is involved.

"Miyagi, I have a promise I'd like you to make, too. Is that okay?"

This isn't ideal.

Even if I sacrifice my credibility to visit Miyagi's workplace, it only erodes her trust further, yielding nothing beneficial. Yet, I do not intend to amend the silent addition I've made. Moreover, I want a new promise in return.

"Is this an exchange?" she inquired.
"Yes."
"…I'll listen, for now. What promise?"

Miyagi spoke with a probing tone, eyes fixed intently on me.

"On your workdays, let me mark you."
"—Mark?"
"You've marked me before. I want to do the same."

I won't let her say she doesn't remember.
When I started working at the café, Miyagi marked me.

To put it simply, the "mark" is a "kiss mark," and she left several on my body, timed with my shifts at the café.

"No."

Miyagi answered succinctly.

It's unreasonable.
Yet understandable.

She wouldn't let me do that to her.
I understand, but still feel the urge to complain today.

"Isn't it unfair, Miyagi?"
"It’s not unfair."
"It is unfair. Let me mark you."
"No."
"What's your reason for refusing?"
"Because having something like that visible when at work is inconvenient."
"I had the same issue, but you still marked me."
"…That's true."

In apparent discomfort, Miyagi averted her gaze, pulling the crocodile tissue cover towards her and clutching it.

"How about this? Miyagi, you mark me like you did when I was working. That should be acceptable, right?"
"…Why does Sendai-san sometimes say such perverted things?"

Miyagi's voice dropped to a murmur.

She directed her gaze to the crocodile, avoiding eye contact with me.

"I think it's Miyagi who's making me say perverted things."

I snatched the crocodile from her and placed it on the bed. Today, Roro-chan, the black cat plushie, isn't there. I don't know what conditions determine when Roro-chan occupies the bed.

"Miyagi, make a promise."

Her hand touches my earring. After lightly tugging at my earlobe, her lips pressed against it. But she quickly sank her teeth in, biting down with reasonable force.

"Ow."

When I objected and pushed her shoulder, she bit down harder before she retreated.

"Does that mean you promised?"
"Sendai-san, you mentioned an exchange yourself."

With a hint of annoyance, Miyagi indicates that she would now leave marks on me on her days working.

"By the way, one more thing. On the days Miyagi works part-time, you have to listen to one thing I say."
"I never agreed to that, and besides, why do I have to listen to you on the days I work part-time?"
"When I hang out with Mio, I follow Miyagi’s request. So when Miyagi sees Mio at work, you should follow one of my requests."

I listen to Miyagi’s request when I go out with Mio.

I've committed to such an arrangement, but I haven't secured a reciprocal deal from Miyagi.

"Mio-san said she's not always there on my workdays."
"Then at least on the days she is, listen to me."

It’s not as if I desperately need her to comply.

Despite that, I end up demanding it because I dislike both Miyagi’s

rejections and her working through Mio’s introduction. To extend further, I also dislike Mio for creating such circumstances.

Mio should run a hundred laps around the schoolyard in penance.

"Sendai-san, what's wrong?"

The irritation in her voice was palpable.

"What do you mean?"
"You're not like your usual self. You never bring up things like this."

When I'm with Miyagi, I can't remain as I usually am. Miyagi has changed me significantly, and she will continue to do so.

Likewise, I wish for Miyagi to transform more for me. I want her to show me sides that she doesn't reveal to others.

"Like I said earlier, it's you who makes me say these things."

I mumbled, prompting her to furrow her brow.

"What does that mean?"
"If you can't understand, that's fine. But if you're unwilling to follow through, at least grant one request."
"…What request?"
"Noto-senpai. She's a regular at the café, so she'll likely come when you're working. Just, don't take her words seriously."
"What’s that about?"

I touched the earring she wore, gently caressing her cheek.

Miyagi's expression remained unchanged, staring at me directly.

"Noto-senpai only ever spouts nonsense. If you talk to her, just humor her without taking any of it seriously."

At the café where Miyagi works, Noto-senpai is a regular visitor. She's not entirely a bad person, but she can be troublesome.

When I asked her to stay away from Miyagi, she never agreed, only vaguely mentioned that she'd refrain. I'm left uncertain about her actions.

"I doubt I'd have anything to discuss with her, so I likely won't need to entertain her."

As she said that, Miyagi pulled my hand away from her cheek with a firm tug.

"You don't need to entertain her, that's a promise."
"Wasn't it a request?"
"A request is similar to a promise, right?"

I kissed Miyagi's earring.

Senpai tangled with Miyagi without consulting me, filling her head with nonsense. Though our relationship changed because of it, it wasn't the change I had desired.

Therefore, I'd rather Miyagi and Noto-senpai not meet at all.

"And if a strange person approaches you, don’t follow them. Firmly refuse."
"Sendai-san, you're treating me like a child. There's no need to worry about that."
"Do you understand what I mean by strange person?"
"A strange person is a strange person, right?"
"I mean, don't get picked up by someone sketchy."
"Me?"
"Miyagi."
"There's absolutely no need to worry about that."

Miyagi declared decisively, then added, "Hey, Sendai-san."

"What?"
"…You wouldn't follow them, right?"
"I’d never follow someone like that."
"Then that's fine."

After saying that, Miyagi reached over to the bed, pulled the crocodile close, and hugged it tightly.

Words I Don't Want to Hear from Miyagi (III)

Part 330

Go, go, don't go, go, don't go.

The fact that there are more "go's" than "don't go's" reflects my true feelings.

I desperately want to visit Miyagi at her part-time job.

But choosing "go" would certainly ruin Miyagi's mood, and I've been wavering on this since morning.

It's Miyagi's first day at the part-time job.

My spirits are sunk deep in the water's depths, so profoundly that they can't resurface. Yet, I can't abandon my daily routine. Dragging my heavy feet, I made it to the university, only to spend my lunch break in the cafeteria with a sense of disinterest swallowing me.

"Hazuki. You've been staring at me all day today. Do you like me that much?"

Sitting opposite of me at the table, Mio, who created the situation making me feel this way, speaks in a carefree tone.

"Do I look like I'm about to confess?"

The reason I keep looking at Mio is because she's the one who took Miyagi away from me; there's no deeper meaning.

"Doesn't look like it. You have this gloomy face while staring at me. …Did something happen?"
"Not yet."
"'Not yet,' you say, like something is going to happen soon."
"Nothing really, but…"

Actually, there is.

Because of Mio, Miyagi's part-time job is starting in a few hours. But telling Mio wouldn't change anything, nor do I plan to.

I know Mio isn't to blame. Mio did nothing wrong. She's actually a genuinely good person.

Her kind-heartedness led to introducing Miyagi to a part-time job, making me feel like it's the end of the world.

I relax the muscles on my furrowed brow and take a bite of hamburg steak, a dish Miyagi likes.

Delicious.

Now that I think about it, I haven't made hamburg steak in a while.

It's been some time since I last made it, so perhaps it's about time to serve it for dinner. I consider making it tonight just because, but a sigh escapes me.

Miyagi’s workplace, that café, provides meals, so she won't be having dinner at home. The thought squeezes my heart painfully.

"Mio, are you free today?"

I know from Miyagi that Mio has work today, so she's not actually free. Still, I want to hear her say she won't go to work, so I watch her finish her ginger pork set meal.

"Oh, what's this? Are you inviting me out for once, Hazuki? I'm really happy about that, but I have work today."

With her ever-cheerful demeanor, Mio tells me what I already know.

It seems the future is unchangeable.

Even though I was aware, my mood plummets to a place even deeper beneath the waters. It's a world where nothing can be seen, and feeling cheerful is impossible.

"At the café?"

I utter words whose answer I already know and take another bite of

the dwindling hamburg steak. In this world of darkness, at least my sense of taste is still there.

The hamburg steak is delicious.

So delicious that I want to eat it again tonight. But Miyagi won't be here to have dinner with me today.

"Yeah, at the café."

Mio replies in a bright voice I can't possibly emulate.

"You're not going to ditch, are you?"
"It's Shiori-chan's first day at work, after all. She must be nervous, so I have to be there for her."

Mio's kindness irritates me.

I wish she were more careless, ditching work to hang out with me instead.

If she did, Miyagi would have to work without knowing anyone there. She's reluctant about working, so she might even quit if that happened.

"Oh, by the way! Hazuki."

Mio's unnecessarily cheerful voice cuts through, disrupting my dark thoughts that burn darker than the water's depth.

Driving out my hopeless thoughts, I seal away the not-so-good parts of me and respond with "What?" Her voice grows even more exuberant.

"Why not come to the café for a meal today? You can see Shiori-chan in action."
"Miyagi's in the kitchen, right?"
"That's true, but if you come, she could come to take your order."

Mio's words that would likely make Miyagi faint are accompanied by her bright smile.

Mio is sometimes careless, but she's inherently a good person. It makes sense for Miyagi to urge me to befriend her.

But I can’t muster the mood for chummy interactions today.

I scoop up the remaining hamburg steak, swallowing it along with unsaid words.

"…I'll pass for today. She’s probably nervous on her first day."

Since Mio invited me, I could easily go.

Deep down, I want to say "I'll go," but showing up on Miyagi's very first workday isn't the best idea.

"That's kind of you."
"Not as much as you, Mio."

I'm not kind at all. Even now, that troublesome side of me says I should just go to the café, or I could lock Miyagi in her room so she can't work.

I press down on the spot just below my collarbone through my shirt.

Miyagi marked me there this morning.

Even though I told her it was okay to place it somewhere visible, she unbuttoned my blouse and pressed her lips to a place that was hidden.

In moments like that, Miyagi is really boring.

She could have left more marks, but she only left one, and it was so faint it would quickly disappear. On top of that, when I kissed her, she stomped hard on my foot, and when I said I wanted more kisses, she left for university without me.

It's unfair.

There have been times when she initiated things, but she won't do anything if I make a move. Given this, I should have caught her before she left for university this morning and whispered “I love you” in her ear again and again—

It's no use. I wouldn’t be convincing even if I said it all day.

"Hey, Hazuki."

Lost in impossible fantasies, Mio's voice jolts me, prompting an automatic "What?"

"You went silent all of a sudden, I was wondering why."
"Sorry. I was just thinking about what to eat for dinner tonight. Miyagi won't be home."

Lying comes easy to me. The words flow out with practiced ease.

"Oh, right. Without Shiori-chan, you're alone."
"Cooking for just one person is such a hassle."
"Once Shiori-chan is accustomed to the job, I'll cut back on my shifts. Let's go eat together, okay?"

With a cheerful demeanor, Mio suggests happily.

"The earlier the better."

Though I don't entirely accept it, Miyagi working is inevitable. It's also inevitable that it’s that café. But what I can't stand, what I won't tolerate, is Mio being close to Miyagi. I want to separate them.

Part of my agreement with Miyagi is to bond with Mio.

"That's unusual for you to say something like that. I'm kind of happy, so maybe I'll go earlier. Can I set the plans?"
"Sure."

A wretched thought of "kill two birds with one stone" surfaces.

But it's true, going to dinner with Mio not only provides two benefits, but a third. Because whenever I meet Mio, Miyagi will give me orders.

On the days I meet Mio, I will do what Miyagi says.

That's our agreement.

"When would be a good time?"

As she said that, Mio took out her smartphone and began checking her schedule. Watching her, I found myself wishing that day would

come sooner.

Chapter 115

What Sendai-san Needs (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 331

A few hours in a day isn't long.

Working three times a week, considering a week has seven days, doesn't feel excessive. When thinking in terms of months, it's even more insignificant, and when framed in a year, the time spent working part-time is just a sliver.

Thus, this should just be a brief task that will end in no time.

—Yet, for some reason, it feels immensely overwhelming.

My first part-time job, on my first day.

In the kitchen, the "senpai" at this job work with a friendly demeanor. There aren't any intimidating individuals.

Everyone is kind, yet I feel an urge to escape.

I don't particularly love washing dishes, but it's something I've done normally before and is quite manageable.

However, when considering it as work, merely washing dishes starts to feel incredibly challenging.

This café is where Sendai-san used to work part-time, and Mio-san introduced me to it. The atmosphere of the shop and the people working here aren't bad. The manager, who explained the job and conducted my interview, is kind and thorough, making it seem like an ideal place for a first-time part-timer.

But I don't belong.

Although I'm wearing the same uniform and have been accepted as

a new employee, my body doesn't seem to fit the uniform, nor does it fit the place.

I know it's merely my imagination, but it feels like the uniform, which indicates my belonging, is rejecting me and so is this place.

And today, almost in a training-like fashion with just the simple task of washing dishes, I'm so nervous my hands won't move right.

The sponge for washing dishes feels as hard as stone, and it seems like the dishes have a will of their own, about to slip from my hands.

I'm afraid I might mess up everything I do. I really admire people who can act confidently in such "first time" settings.

—For instance, like Sendai-san.

I finish washing the remaining plates, dry my hands, and press just below my collarbone over my café uniform.

There's nothing under my hand.

But this morning, marking Sendai-san here, I left a trace of myself on her.

I wanted to leave a mark where it would be visible for a long time.

But I didn't.

Sendai-san said I could mark her where it would be visible, but if Mio-san saw it at university, I would be peppered with questions during work, which would be bothersome, and it would make buying the necklace pointless.

A sign that, without reproach, shows that Sendai-san belongs to me.

The necklace I am to buy will become such an item.

I made the mark so faint that it would be gone by tomorrow morning, also to prevent myself from running away from my part-time job.

I want to buy the necklace with my own money, not someone else's,

so I want to avoid doing anything that would make me want to quit the job. If I didn't make a mark that could be easily erased, I'd end up wanting to leave the role of claiming Sendai-san as mine to a mere mark.

It’s going to be alright.

The mark is important, but right now there's something else that takes priority. I can do my best because I have a goal: to buy a necklace that anyone can see and know that Sendai-san is mine.

I can handle working.
It’s nothing difficult.
Even Maika does it, and Asakura-san as well.

“Shiori-chan, are you alright?”

Mio-san’s voice, which should have been in the hall, catches my ear, and I glance up.

Mio-san, whose smile I only remember being like an excessively bright light, now appears genuinely concerned, compelling me to hurriedly say, “I’m okay.” I add, “...probably,” quietly.

“No need to push yourself. Let me know if anything’s troubling you.”

Setting down the dishes in her hands, she says kindly.

More compassionate than I imagined, she’s been looking after me ever since I started today. It seems she brought these dishes over to check on me out of concern.

“I’m fine for now.”

“I see, that’s good. In a while, you’ll have a meal break, so hang in there till then.”

“Thanks. I’ll do my best.”

I smile cheerfully, which seems to reassure her as she returns to the hall. I take the next batch of dirty dishes and wash them with the sponge.

Since this café has meal breaks as Mio-san mentioned, I won't be able to have dinner with Sendai-san today.

There have been days like that before, so it's not something to lament about, yet it feels inexplicably dull.

Not everything can go as planned.

Though I understand, missing out on dinner with Sendai-san makes me feel depressed.

—It's no good.

Thinking constantly about Sendai-san feels like being trapped in a maze with no exit, making me somber.

I wash and set aside a dirty dish.
I pick up the next dish, quietly murmuring in my heart, it's okay.

Washing dishes, making drinks, preparing simple meals.

There's a variety of tasks to do, but I've been told I don't have to handle complicated ones until I get the hang of things, so today, washing dishes remains my main task.

However, unlike the café during the cultural festival, here, I am rewarded with money. I want to quickly grasp the work and do it properly.
Therefore, I should focus on what needs to be done here and now.

The kitchen is filled with sounds.

The sizzling of ingredients and people's voices fill my head, driving thoughts of Sendai-san away. The café is busier than I imagined, leaving no time for daydreaming about Sendai-san.

As I move my hands and work diligently to learn new things, time flies by, and my meal break was over before I realized it.

Before I know it, I'm walking the path home.

Everything related to this job was new to me, including taking the train at unusual hours, which drained me significantly. My footsteps on the path illuminated by the streetlights are heavy, yet they feel

surprisingly swift.

Home comes into view sooner than expected.
I dash up the stairs to the third floor.
As soon as I open the door, I find Sendai-san's shoes waiting.

Inhale, exhale.

After taking a breath, I head to the shared space, where I find Sendai-san lifting her head from the table.

“Miyagi, you’re late.”

A rare displeased voice greets me.

“I told you I’d be late.”

“It’s still late.”

Having said that, Sendai-san stands up from her chair and takes my hand.

“Welcome back.”

Upon hearing her low voice, I respond with “I’m home,” and the shared space falls silent.

“Sendai-san, what’s with this?”

I awkwardly ask despite the discomfort, but there’s no answer.

Without a word, Sendai-san pulls my hand, bringing her face closer. It doesn’t take long to understand what that means, and I lightly kick her leg.

“We did it this morning.”

The kiss came after I left a mark.
Rather, Sendai-san initiated it without me even saying it was okay.

"There isn't a rule that says you can't do it at night if you did it in the morning."

"There's no rule saying you can do it at night just because you did it

in the morning either. More importantly, Sendai-san, have you eaten?"

"I was planning to eat after you got back, so I've been waiting."

"I told you this morning I wouldn't eat dinner. You know that café has staff meals, right?"

"I know, but I waited."

"Even if you say you waited, I'm already full and don't need dinner."

"It's fine if you don't eat, Miyagi. Just sit there and watch me eat."

Sendai-san says this as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

She hasn't been in a good mood since morning.
Even now, she doesn't seem particularly cheerful.
Yet she stands here in front of me, refusing to go anywhere else.

She doesn't let go of my hand.
Holding it tightly, she stares at me intently.

"...You're an idiot, Sendai-san."

I quietly inform her, to which she responds in an absurdly serious voice, "Because of you, Miyagi."

What Sendai-san Needs (II)

Part 332

"Let go of my hand."

I said, attempting to pull my hand away from Sendai-san's grasp. But she pulled back, holding on even tighter.

"Sendai-san, aren't you going to eat?"

Upon returning from my part-time job, I found Sendai-san sprawled over the table in the shared space, lost in thought. I couldn't fathom what was going through her mind.

She hadn't eaten dinner, and seemed to be in a bad mood, yet she clung to my hand and refused to let go.

"I'm eating."

"Then let go. How do you plan on eating with one hand?"

"I'll eat if Miyagi says so."

Despite her words, she showed no signs of releasing my hand. It was as if her hand was a magnet clinging to mine.

"Using one hand for dinner is bad manners. Let go and sit over there. Is cup ramen okay for dinner?"

"Will Miyagi eat with me?"

"Didn't you ask me to watch you eat, Sendai-san?"

As if she had forgotten what she had just said, her foot presses against mine, and only then does her hand finally detach from mine.

Without a response to the cup ramen, I turn away from her, fill the electric kettle with water, and start boiling it.

After placing the cup ramen in front of Sendai-san, I also line up

chopsticks on the black cat chopstick rest.

Telling her to open the lid of the container, the water heats up. I pour hot water into the cup ramen, set the kitchen timer, and hand it over to her.

"Eat when the timer beeps."

I convey the obvious, sitting across from her as she intently watches the timer.

I still don't know what she's thinking.

Three minutes pass; the timer beeps, and, as I instructed, she begins to eat the cup ramen. Yet I remain clueless about her thoughts.

Sendai-san seems less spirited than usual.

Like a drenched dog.

Not entirely despondent, but she does appear more pitiful.

"It's delicious."

Noticing my gaze, Sendai-san says with a smile.

"It's just cup ramen."

"Isn't food prepared by someone else just delicious?"

"...It is, but."

Even if I can't understand what she's thinking, I get what she's saying. When someone else prepares food for you, it somehow tastes better, even if it's as simple as pouring hot water into cup ramen.

Somehow, it just happens. When I'm with Sendai-san, everything tastes better.

Maybe it's the same for her.

With me here, even ordinary cup ramen becomes delicious. If that's the case, then I should stay here a while longer.

"Miyagi. How long is the part-time job again, a month?"

Sendai-san murmurs.

"That's the plan. Mio-san asked me to work until the end of summer vacation, though."

"...Do you plan to?"

She pauses her eating, looking up at me.

"I don't."

"I see."

With a sigh of relief, she sounds like a dog waiting for its owner to return.

I don't dislike this version of Sendai-san.

She focuses solely on me, and only thinks of me.

I want her to always be like that, yet it makes me uneasy.

Part of me wants to confine her here, truly making her see nothing else, but another part wants her to return here from outside, wherever she goes.

"Sendai-san. When I work, don't wait—just eat dinner."

"Why? Watch me eat like today."

She responds from across the table, her voice a bit lower.

"I'm watching now, hurry up and eat."

At my words, she begins to eat, though somewhat sulky.

She's truly different today.

Sendai-san always seems more mature, beautiful, and composed than I am, yet today she isn't.

Watching her eat the cup ramen she claimed to be delicious without

satisfaction, I'm endlessly entertained. I want to keep watching Sendai-san like this.

But the cup ramen vanishes in an instant, and Sendai-san cleans up the empty container, washing the chopsticks and rest too.

"Miyagi, what are you going to do next?"

Instead of returning to her seat, Sendai-san approaches my side. So I turn towards her.

"...Paw."

Though I didn't say it loudly, when I held out my hand, Sendai-san, without a word of complaint, offered her hand like a dog.

"Miyagi. What's next?"

The talking dog naturally demands another command.

"Sendai-san, do you want to be a dog?"

"I'm a Borzoi, aren't I?"

I had indeed told her that once. Long and slim, with fine, sleek hair, she's like a large, beautiful dog.

But not entirely.

"A Borzoi seems smarter than Sendai-san."

"That might be true."

She accepts my less than flattering words without much reaction, prompting my curiosity.

"…Sendai-san, if I told you to wait, would you just wait here like a dog without eating your food?"

“If Miyagi tells me to. -- If you want me to be a penguin or a shoebill instead of a dog, I'd be happy to become one of those instead.”

"You're not as cute as a penguin, Sendai-san."

"Isn't that harsh?"

"It's not. And you're not as amusing as a shoebill."

"That's still harsh, isn't it? Not cute or amusing?"

"That's not it."

Sendai-san is "beautiful," not "cute," and I don't seek amusement in her.

"Then what is it?"

"Just be a human. Eat without waiting for me when I have work. If I know you're waiting at home without eating, I'll be distracted when I'm working."

Sendai-san has waited at home before, but waiting today without eating is different.

Work makes me inevitably late, and I've told her we can't eat together then. If I knew someone was waiting without eating, I wouldn't be able to focus.

I fear I'd only think about Sendai-san, even more than today.

"Think of me at work."

She says in a strangely serious tone, eyes fixed on me.

"I'm afraid I'll mess up."

"I don't mind if you mess up and quit."

Her reckless words escape, and I step on her foot.

"Don't say that. Promise you'll eat alone on my workdays."

"And if I don't?"

"I'll be mad."

I glare at her, and for good measure, I poke her stomach.

"...Alright. I'll promise, so stand here, Miyagi."

With a resigned voice, she pulls my arm. Reluctantly, I stand and face Sendai-san, who tucks my hair behind my ear. Her lips brush against my plumeria earring and then pull away.

"I promise to eat alone on days when you have work."

Saying this, she kisses the earring again and embraces me tightly.

"It's fine to promise on an earring, but I didn't say you could do things like this."

"I'm marking you," Sendai-san replies, earnestly, which sounds utterly ridiculous.

"Enough with being a dog. Change back to a human."

"Maybe if Miyagi gives me Sunday, I could change back. You don't have work this Sunday, right?"

"I don't have work, but what would you do if I gave you Sunday?"

"...What if I said 'a date'?"

Still hugging me, she proposes something that seems too ridiculous to be true. She really does say the most absurd things.

"No," I state firmly, pushing against her. Her arms tighten around me.

"Then how about chatting at home?"

"I don't mind if you do the talking."

"Then it's settled."

With that, Sendai-san kisses my earring again.

What Sendai-san Needs (III)

Part 333

Mio-san is kind and reliable.

Though I can't exactly get along with her, there's no denying she's a good person. At work today, she backed me up when I suddenly had to take orders.

Even though, after working for three days, I can't say I've found the job fun, I feel like I can manage a month because of Mio-san's support.

The problem is Sendai-san.

Sendai-san continues to occupy my mind, even while I'm at work. And, as usual, she's been in a foul mood since morning. Tomorrow is the Sunday she wanted, the one I gave to her, yet her mood hasn't improved.

It occurs to me that maybe I was like this when Sendai-san first started working. Thinking that way makes it seem like she's done nothing wrong and that I should be kind to her. But when she's in a bad mood, it's just dull.

I know I'm being selfish, but Sendai-san should be cheerful around me. Even if I say no, I think it would be perfect if she kissed me regardless.

After returning from my shift, I find it unsatisfying that Sendai-san follows the rules, eats her dinner as instructed, and then remains holed up in her room. This isn't something I can allow.

I want her to be in the shared space when I come home, and I want her to complain about my part-time job.

Even before I started this job, there were times when Sendai-san wouldn't be in the shared space, and it was normal for there to be a Sendai-san who doesn’t complain and a Sendai-san who doesn't kiss me. But I can't accept those norms anymore.

I can't help but dislike my selfishness, but I am dissatisfied when Sendai-san isn't in front of me.

This is all Sendai-san's fault.

Usually, she's so carefree and elusive, yet she suddenly turned into a weary puppy, making it impossible not to be concerned.

That's why, even without a reason, it's fine for me to knock on the door in front of me. Even if I'm exhausted from this unfamiliar job and want to relax since I have to give tomorrow to Sendai-san, it’s okay to knock without hesitation.

Today, it doesn’t matter if there isn’t a reason or anything to say.

After a small inhale and exhale, I knock softly on the door once.

"Sendai-san, open up."

Though I add a word, the door doesn’t open. I hear, “You can come in,” in response. Since it's not an order, I have no right to complain that she didn’t open the door, but I’m still displeased.

But I can achieve the goal of entering the room, so I open the door myself to find Sendai-san glaring at what seems to be a reference book on the table.

I approach her and glance at the book on the table.

"…Is this for tutoring?"

The book before my eyes doesn't even need further recollection; it’s something I recognize from my high school days, suggesting that what Sendai-san is doing right now isn’t for me.

"I was preparing materials for Kikyō-chan."

As I expected, and in a flat tone, she adds, “And what are you up to, Miyagi?”

"Nothing in particular, but it's okay not to have anything."

I sit next to Sendai-san and close the book on the table.

“I haven’t finished yet.”

Her voice carries a note of discontent. I reply, “You’ll still make it if you don't do it now, right?”

"I can make it, but I'm in the middle of something."
"…Then, go ahead and continue."
"And while I'm doing this, what will Miyagi do?"

I pull down the penguin plush on the bed, hugging it.

"Talk to this."

The prize from a crane game that Sendai-san couldn’t win, and that I picked up and gave to her might make for easy conversation. However, before I can start talking to the penguin, Sendai-san speaks up.

"If you're going to talk to Pen-chan, why not talk to me instead? How was work?"

"Busy."

"That's all?"

"Mio-san is nicer than I thought."

Upon hearing that, Sendai-san furrows her brow.

Again, I think.

Since I started this job, I’ve mentioned Mio-san a few times, but Sendai-san never seems pleased. However, for Sendai-san, Mio-san could become someone like Maika is to me. The fact that Mio-san is "nice" is significant; it's not something to frown over.

Though It really, really, annoys me.

“Well, Mio is pretty reliable, and fun to be around.”

Sendai-san says lightly, then pats the penguin's head, which I’m holding.

This kind of Sendai-san isn’t amusing.

Just as I wish she wouldn’t talk about tutoring, I also wish she wouldn’t talk about Mio-san.

Although I’m the one who told her to get along with Mio-san, I still find myself hoping she wouldn’t meet with Mio-san. It doesn’t matter if Mio-san is a good person or not; I can't feel good about Sendai-san meeting with her. I don't want to feel good about it.

Perhaps it was a mistake wishing for Sendai-san to become normal.

This feeling seems like a thorn that won’t disappear anytime soon.

“I’m done talking about work.”

I cut off the conversation heading in an unpleasant direction.

Discussing the café inevitably brings Mio-san into the mix. That isn't ideal, so ending this conversation swiftly is best.

“That’s fine, but just one more thing.”

I'm not inclined to say it’s fine.
But before I can say no, Sendai-san adds, “...Has Noto-senpai been around?”

“She’s been there.”

“Did you talk?”

“We didn’t. I'm in the kitchen, plus it seems like she comes to talk to Mio-san, so even if I weren't in the kitchen, I probably wouldn’t speak with Noto-san.”

“I see. Like I said before, even if you do get a chance to talk with her, don’t take what Senpai says too seriously. She tends to talk nonsense.”

Sendai-san, speaking in an unreadable tone, takes the penguin from me, holding it the way I did.

“…Do you talk with Noto-san often, Sendai-san?”

“We talked a lot when I was working, but at university, not so much.”

“You talked a lot, huh.”

With nothing left to hold, I hug my knees.

“She approaches me to talk.”

“Hmm.”

I squeeze my hands, then release them.
I place my hands flat on the floor.

It feels as if staying here might lead to the floor giving way beneath me, dropping me from the third floor into some unreachable place below.

“I’m going back to my room for today.”

I didn’t come to Sendai-san with anything specific to talk about. I had no purpose, so there’s no point in lingering.

I push against the floor to stand up.
But Sendai-san grabs my wrist.

“Stay here tonight. You’re giving tomorrow to me, right?”

She quietly says, tightening her grip on my wrist.

"I told you before, staying over in the same room is no good. Besides, I’m giving you tomorrow, not tonight."

"But it's almost tomorrow, so what's the harm?"

"It's not okay. There are still about two hours left. Besides, you're such a perv, Sendai-san."

"Miyagi, do you really think I'd do something?"

"I don't want you to do anything."

"…You really wouldn't want me to?"

Sendai-san asks something unserious in an annoyingly serious tone, and I glare at her.

"As if I'd ever say I want that."

I peel off her hand stuck to my wrist and shove her shoulder hard.

"Miyagi, that hurts."

"It’s supposed to. I'm going back to my room, so stop saying weird stuff."

"Hold on. Tell me what it would take for you to stay."

"No matter what you do, I won't stay. Why do you even want me to stay over so badly?"

"It’s lonely sleeping alone."

"Haven't you always slept alone?"

"There are just days like that."

It’s not that I can't relate.

Though not to the point of feeling lonely, there have been numerous nights in the past when I didn’t want to be alone.

Most of those were before I moved here, and since I started room-sharing with Sendai-san, such thoughts have been rare. Yet, there are still occasional nights when the room feels unusually vast.

A room with no one but me.
Nights that are too quiet.
Nights filled with thoughts I'd rather avoid.
Nights that make me want to gather up the labels I've peeled off or never stuck on my memories.

Sendai-san's words remind me of those nights and make it hard to dismiss her.

"...If you can face the wall and sleep quietly without looking at me, then fine."

As I declare my maximum compromise while staring at the floor, a complaint shoots back from beside me.

"Staring at the wall with my eyes open, I won't be able to sleep."

"…If you're going to be nitpicky, I'll sleep in my own room."

"Okay, okay. I'll sleep facing the wall with my eyes open if that's what it takes."

"You're annoying."

"It's fine. I promise I'll be well-behaved and sleep."

With that quiet promise from Sendai-san, not only did I end up giving her my tomorrow, but also the time leading up to it.

"I'm going to take a bath, so wait for me."

"Hurry."

She didn't set a specific time, but she urged me on, placing the penguin she'd been holding down onto the floor.

What Sendai-san Needs (IV)

Part 334

“Miyagi, did you dry your hair properly?”

As soon as I step into the room, Sendai-san’s voice reaches me.

Since this is her room, it’s not strange for her voice to fill the space. What is strange, however, is her treating me like a little child.

I understand it’s my past actions that have prompted Sendai-san’s current words, but she’s worrying too much.

"I dried it."

"Really?"

"Really."

Earlier this year, I caught a cold.
To be precise, it was during the Golden Week holiday.

One of the reasons was because I hadn’t properly dried my hair after a bath, leading Sendai-san to always check my hair since then.

But people don’t catch colds so easily.

Even more, I've learned my lesson, and I'm thoroughly drying my hair with a blow dryer now. So, there’s really no need for anyone to verify it, yet here comes Sendai-san, approaching the door where I'm standing to touch my hair.

“Can’t you tell if it’s dry just by looking?”

“It might just look dry.”

While I was in the bath, Sendai-san changed into her sweatpants that she uses as pajamas, and now she gently brushes my hair, as I'm wearing a similar pair of sweats.

Her touch feels nice, making me want her to continue. But if I indulge her in things she hasn't asked permission for, it could lead to trouble.

"Sendai-san, it's annoying when you talk like a parent."

Lightly kicking Sendai-san's leg, as she's come too close, halts her brushing.

"Did your parents often ask if you'd dried your hair?"

"…They didn't."

I have no memory of my parents asking me that, but I do recall scenes on TV with parents doing just that.

"Then I'm not really saying things like a parent, am I?"

"Sendai-san, stop being so noisy. Move aside, I want to put this down."

Using the pillow I'd brought from my room, I press against Sendai-san's stomach.

"Let me do it. I'll set it down for you."

"No thanks. You'd just put it in the back."

There's no spare futon in this room, and I haven't brought one from my room either. Sleeping in the same bed is a given. That is why I must prevent her from getting the pillow.

Sendai-san will be on the side by the wall.
That's already decided.

If she gets the pillow and I end up sleeping against the wall, she might pin me down, making it impossible to move.

"Does it matter where you sleep?"

"Yes, it does. Didn't we agree before the bath? You promised to quietly sleep facing the wall, Sendai-san. So, you go to the wall-side."

“I remember, you don’t have to push it.”

Resigned, Sendai-san heads to the bed. She moves the pillow she’d set down to the far side and places the stuffed penguin on the floor.

“Is this okay?”

Confirming aloud, I move to the bed.

“The pillow is fine there, but please sleep as close to the wall as possible.”

“Okay, okay.”

Responding nonchalantly, Sendai-san lies down on the bed. I place my pillow beside her and give her a light nudge.

“Move a bit more that way.”

“It’s cramped.”

“Even if it's cramped.”

“Okay, okay.”

“And change your position, look at the wall.”

I complain as she’s inexplicably facing me.

“Miyagi, you do know there’s a wall there too, right?”

Pointing to the wall behind my back instead of the one against which the bed rests, Sendai-san smiles.

She can be quite difficult at times like this.

She knows full well the wall I meant and deliberately uses a different one to tease me.

“Normally, you’d know which wall to face without being told.”

“If there’s a specific wall you want me to look at, say it clearly from the start.”

“Sendai-san, you're really frustrating.”

I know her tendencies, yet her nitpicking is infuriating. But today, I might forgive this side of Sendai-san.

It’s lonely to sleep by oneself.

I’m not so heartless to push away someone who brings up such sentiments, even if it comes from someone like Sendai-san.

“If you don’t mind seeing nothing, then just keep looking at me.”

I burrow into the bed, turn my back to Sendai-san, and turn off the lights, plunging the room into darkness without a word.

“Turn on the nightlight. Also, face me.”

“No to both.”

“I’ll look at the wall you want when we sleep, but for just a bit, face this way. It’s... lonely.”

Sendai-san is cunning today.
Bringing up loneliness just makes me recall my past self and stops me from denying her.

“Just for five minutes.”

Setting a time limit, I shift my position.

On a bed too small for two, I open my eyes and look ahead.
In the darkness, Sendai-san’s silhouette is faintly visible.

Her hand warmly brushes my cheek, and slowly, her warmth envelops more than just my cheek as the bed creaks.

“Sendai-san, don’t move closer.”

A distance where our feet almost touch is too close. I never said it was okay to get this close on the bed.

“I just thought Miyagi smells nice.”

“It’s the same scent.”

We both use the same shampoo. If there's a nice scent, that's the reason.

"No it's not. Miyagi smells better."

"It's just your imagination."

"It's not."

I push at her overly close shoulder, but instead of backing off, she locks me in her arms. "You really do smell nice," she says.

"You're such a pervert, Sendai-san."

"It's not my fault I'm deprived of you."

"What are you talking about?"

"…I feel lonely coming home, only for Miyagi to be at work."

Sendai-san mutters, tightening her embrace.

I don't recall her ever expressing something like this before.

I want to see her face now, to see what she looks like, but it's impossible. The room is dark, and we're too close together.

"Sendai-san, you also leave me to go to work."

Neither her tutoring job nor the café gig she doesn't currently have are things I like. I've asked her to quit before.

Yet, she continues with the tutoring job, and there's still a possibility she might unexpectedly return to her café job.

Sendai-san who doesn't concede to me on the matter of work has no right to dictate when I can work.

"True," Sendai-san says, devoid of emotion.

"You're not going to quit work, right?"

"True."

Repeating words I don’t want to hear makes me want to plug my ears, but before I can, her next words slip through.

“…Do you ever feel lonely, Miyagi?”

Her frail voice seems on the verge of disappearing, so I rest my forehead on her shoulder.

“I told you before that I don’t like empty homes.”

“I’m sorry.”

Even though I didn’t want an apology, Sendai-san apologizes.

If she's going to say sorry, I wish she’d quit working.
My feelings towards her working haven’t improved.

“Let go, five minutes are up.”

I push against her body that clings to me more than necessary.

"You're not really timing it, are you?"

"I can tell roughly without timing it."

The time limit is just an excuse.
It doesn’t really matter whether five minutes have passed or not.

After all, Sendai-san was the one who broke the promise by not looking at the assigned wall and touching me instead, so I should have the right to break promises too.

"Let’s just stay like this," she whispers near my ear.

“…For how long?”

Even if it’s just an excuse, we still need a time limit.
It's wrong to touch each other without a limit.

“Until morning.”

“No way. Just five more minutes.”

“Then until you fall asleep, Miyagi.”

"You’re not really listening to me, are you?"

"Let me do this just for today."

Sendai-san is really cunning.
Cunning, but today I have no choice but to forgive her.
That’s what I think.

Chapter 116

Miyagi's Time (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 335

Was it getting hot?
Or was it too cramped?
Miyagi escaped from my arms.

Miyagi was in my bed, in my arms, for five minutes.

Though she set this rule and never retracted it, the agreement we arrived at was "until Miyagi falls asleep," which fortunately prolonged her time in my embrace.

Hence, Miyagi has the right to turn over and move away from me. She also has the right to sleep curled up with her back facing me.

But having Miyagi out of my arms is far from enjoyable, and seeing her back turned towards me isn't exactly pleasant either.

"Miyagi."

I call softly.

I wait until my eyes are accustomed to the darkness. Until I can discern Miyagi's silhouette in this ink-colored world.

I call her name once more, "Miyagi," and nudge her rounded back.

There's no response.

This time, I try calling her "Shiori."

Normally, she'd grumble crankily at me, but I hear nothing from Miyagi, and she doesn't stir.

“Wake up.”

I grip her shoulder gently.

I feel guilty. I know she's exhausted from her new, unfamiliar part-time job. It's neither the right thing to say nor do, but I want her to turn toward me, so I call her name once more, "Miyagi."

It's okay if she doesn't want to be embraced. But even if she's asleep, I want her to face this way.

"Miyagi, please."

She stretches her back with a faint voice, leaving the curled position like a cat, yet she doesn't face me.

"Look this way."

With my hand pressed against her back, I voice my request.

"This way?"

"Yes. Turn towards me."

When I tug on Miyagi's sweatshirt, a little voice murmurs, "nngh." Her body soon starts to move, and I release her sweatshirt.

"This way?"

Her drowsy voice confirms her orientation as she faces me, then she pulls the blanket and curls up again.

I've never owned a cat, but I imagine that if I had one, it might behave like this.

As I watch Miyagi in the dimly lit room, I half-expect to see cat ears and a tail sprout from her.

I reach for Miyagi's hair, as if searching for nonexistent cat ears. I gently tousle her hair and comb through it. There are no cat ears. I'm tempted to check her backside for a tail, but I refrain before my reason slips too far.

"Miyagi."

I comb through her hair and plant a kiss on her forehead. "Goodnight," I say, and receive a drowsy "good night" in return.

I make her grip the hem of my sweatshirt so she won't drift away. She doesn't resist, her hand obediently clutching the fabric.

Leaning forward, I kiss her on the tip of her nose.

Miyagi generally wears a displeased expression, yet now, she sleeps peacefully. Seeing her calmly sleeping beside me makes me feel a bit trusted and content.

Yet, I think that too much contact might disturb her sleep.

Though I think this, I can't make myself stop reaching out to Miyagi. I wish for her to sleep deeply, but I find myself repeatedly stroking her as if to affirm her presence.

Even though it's only been a week since she started her part-time job, I'm baffled by how much it's affected me. The weeks ahead seem terribly long and daunting.

Still, seeing Miyagi by my side like this makes me think that maybe the part-time job isn't so bad after all.

"Miyagi."

There's no reply, but her hand grips my sweatshirt.

Even though I want to keep watching her, I place my hand over hers and close my eyes.

I'm not at all sleepy. Sleep is a distant specter, on the far-off horizon.

But when I close my eyes and remain still, sleepiness quietly creeps in. After a long spell, I drift off, only to wake up shortly after. I verify that Miyagi is still beside me, give her a soft kiss, and close my eyes again.

Repeating this several times, when I eventually open my eyes to a brightened room, I find Miyagi is also awake.

"Good morning."

Miyagi's voice reaches me, so I greet her back with a "Good morning." As I lean forward to kiss her, she covers my mouth with her hand.

"Don't do unnecessary things."

A disgruntled voice comes from her.

Even though I've already kissed her countless times before morning.

That's what I want to say, but saying it would probably anger Miyagi, so I keep it to myself.

Sunday has only just begun.

Even though I've grown used to Miyagi's constant complaints, I wish these peaceful moments could last just a little longer.

Peeling away the hand covering my mouth, I gently inquire, "What have you been up to?"

"...Nothing."

"Were you watching me?"

"If you already know, why ask?"

A disgruntled voice, accompanied by an abrupt pull on the blanket.

"So you really were watching."

When I woke up, our eyes met. I thought it was a coincidence, but now I know otherwise. I pull away the blanket covering her and inch closer to Miyagi.

"Why were you watching me?"

"Because Sendai-san looked like you were dead, so I was checking if you were still alive."

"What's that about? You could have just woken me up."

"You woke up on your own, didn't you?"

Although what she says is true, I still wish she'd have woken me up before I stirred awake.

If Miyagi is awake, I'd like to be awake with her. I want to enjoy every second, every moment together.

Watching Miyagi sleep beside me like a cat is nice, but I also wish to see her furrowed brow, her grumpy voice, and the way she glares at me.

But if I voice any of these thoughts, Miyagi will never wake me up again, so I stay silent.

“Did you sleep well, Miyagi?”

I ask the unnecessary question on purpose, and Miyagi frowns.

“Thanks to Sendai-san, I couldn’t sleep well. I had the weirdest dream.”

She looks at me, obviously annoyed.

“Is that really my fault?”

“Well, Sendai-san appeared in my dream.”

“What kind of dream was it?”

“... It was a dream where Sendai-san called my name while throwing a penguin plushie at me, and the penguin turned into a giant and started snuggling with me.”

Well, it's probably my fault.

It's not exactly wrong to blame me.

I suspect that my actions while Miyagi was asleep somehow influenced her dreams.

Calling her name resulted in her dreaming of me calling her in the dream. When I nudged her, she probably translated that into being hit by a penguin plushie in her dream. Me touching or kissing her manifested as the penguin in her dream growing attached to her.

It had to be something like that.

“Sorry.”

I confess to the crime of disturbing her slumber and apologize.

“Why are you apologizing? It was just a dream.”

“Still, sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“But... sorry.”

“You’re persistent, Sendai-san. More than that, I’m hungry.”

Miyagi grabs my arm as she sits up. It’s unmistakably a signal for me to get up, which is far from appealing.

“Why don’t we just laze around a bit longer?”

“No way.”

In a somewhat irritable voice, Miyagi mumbles, giving my arm a small smack. Although I'm not entirely pleased myself, Miyagi's growling stomach takes precedence.

“Is it alright if we have bread for breakfast?”

I ask as I sit up, and she responds with a simple, “Sure.” As she announces, “I’m going to change,” and starts to get off the bed, I tug at her sweatshirt.

“Miyagi, wait.”

“What?”

“There’s something I want to do today, is that okay?”

“You said we’d just chat at home today, right?”

Her voice drops into a lower tone than before.

“I know I said that, but wouldn’t it be nice to do something small?”

“...I’ll decide after I hear what that ‘something’ is.”

“I’ll make breakfast, but let’s cook dinner together, okay?”

I haven’t decided on the menu yet. However, it's clear that whatever Miyagi wants to eat, that’s what we’ll make.

“...If it’s just that much, then fine.”

Reluctantly, hesitantly. Miyagi responds in such a voice and climbs out of bed.

Miyagi's Time (II)

Part 336

Orange juice.
Toast spread with jam and butter.
Sausages and scrambled eggs, and the shredded cabbage that Miyagi prepared even though she said she'd let me do it.

The menu was nothing special, but it was enough for breakfast and vanished into our stomachs.

And now, Miyagi is in my room.

Though we didn't agree to meet up in my room after getting dressed and having breakfast, Miyagi arrived with a soda and barley tea in hand. She isn't in a particularly good mood, but neither is she in a bad one as she silently sits beside me.

"Miyagi," I softly call her name, and she responds with, "What?"

I wish times like this could last forever.

I want tomorrow and the day after to be Sunday again. To put it more accurately, I want Miyagi's part-time job to be off tomorrow and the day after as well.

"I just thought you'd be beside me," I say.
“Well, you can see that, can't you?"
“I suppose," I reply, though it's as if I want to confirm that Miyagi is indeed beside me.

Without Miyagi, I end up pondering unnecessary thoughts, turning absurd delusions that she never even mentioned into supposed facts.

The longer Miyagi is away, the more solid these delusions I conjure become, dragging me into the quicksand of anxiety where I nearly stumble.

"You said you'd talk, Sendai-san, so talk."

Miyagi—the one who can make me both happy and unhappy—directs this at me.

"What should I talk about?"
"Think about that yourself."

Today's agenda is "talking," as agreed, with Miyagi specifying that "I" would be the one to do it.

It was all my suggestion, and I meant to follow through, but I hadn't decided on what to talk about.

In short, as long as I could be with Miyagi, the topic didn't matter.

"Hmm," I ponder, holding Miyagi's hand as I try to think of something to say.
When I grip her hand a little tighter, she suggests, "Use this hand instead," and offers me the platypus plush.

"Why?"
"It's not that kind of time right now."
"When will it be 'that kind of time'?"
"Dunno. For now, just be friends with the platypus."

Miyagi's hand slips away, replaced by the soft, short arm of a platypus stuffed with tissues.

It feels rather dull.

I clasp the soft hand of the platypus firmly.

We didn't promise to hold hands today, but since we slept in the same bed, woke up together, had breakfast, and are now side by side like this, Miyagi should at least let me hold her hand.

If she doesn't, it'll make me want to voice thoughts not even worth saying.

"…Can I talk about anything at all?" I ask, tweaking the platypus's beak, my gaze fixed on it.

"If it's boring, I don't want to hear it."
"Then I'll skip it."

"Were you planning to say something boring?"
"That wasn't my intention..."
"It's awkward to stop midway—finish what you started."

Miyagi, speaking in slightly lowered tones, tugs at the platypus's tail.

What I was about to let out is an indelible gray mass inside me, something better left unsaid.

"...Hey," I start, the loss of Miyagi's warmth from my hand making the gray lump rise to the surface.

"What?" she asks, tugging the platypus once more, prompting me to pull back.

A small sigh escapes me. I lift my gaze to meet hers.

"...You aren't saving up money from your part-time job to move out of here, are you?"

The time Miyagi spends away at work feels excessively long to me, steering my thoughts toward incessantly unsatisfying conclusions.

Of course, I quickly discarded such thoughts, yet I remain ensnared in the pessimistic notion that Miyagi might be eager to leave here soon.

Hence, I wanted to sleep together and greet the same morning. I needed to assure myself that Miyagi wasn't going anywhere.

"I'm still a sophomore," comes a low voice from beside me.

"Yes," I nod.
"I said until I graduate university, I'd live here with you."
"You did say that."
"Are you implying that you want me to leave, Sendai-san?"
"No, that's not what I'm saying."
"Then stop saying weird things. I'd have nowhere to go if I were kicked out."
"But you have a place, don't you? Utsunomiya's, for instance… When you ran away, you stayed at her house the whole time."

"If I ran away from here, it means this place is my home," Miyagi

retorts with a hint of irritation, pressing her palm firmly against the floor.

"Does that mean even if you run away, you're sure to return?"
"I'm not going to run away anymore. Say something more interesting, Sendai-san."
"Alright then," I agree.

This conversation holds no deeper meaning.

Miyagi honors the deadlines she sets. Even as a high school student, she attempted to adhere to our agreement that our relationship could only last until graduation.

So she'll also keep her promise to stay until she graduates from university. She won't just up and leave before the agreed time. I'm only reconfirming what I already know.

Yet, I find myself confirming it over and over, realizing that this much Miyagi still isn't enough for me.

"What's with the silence?" Miyagi asks, claiming the platypus from me, sounding bored.

I thought that if we sleep together, there wouldn't be any mental room left for unnecessary thoughts. But the amount of space within me that I wish to fill with Miyagi was beyond my original anticipation.

It looks like the time until we graduate won't be enough, and I find myself wishing to spend even longer with her.

—I have yet to find a way to extend the time we have together though.

"Because I want to hear your voice, Miyagi."

Ideally, I'd love to hear her voice saying we'll live together even after university. I know she won't say it, but still, I wish she would.

"Hey, Sendai-san was supposed to talk," she points out.
"Do you want to hear my voice that much, Miyagi?"
"That's not the point."

I know that this isn't the kind of situation that would lead to the promise I hoped for.

"Sendai-san, you should go to sleep for today," she suggests suddenly.
“What? We just got up."
“Yeah.”
“Why should I sleep?”

Sunday, which I had been eagerly awaiting, had only just begun—sleeping now seems premature. It's not unusual for Miyagi to say whimsical things, but I’d like to at least know the reason behind this one.

"You seem sleepy today, Sendai-san."
"I'm not," I deny, though it’s half a lie. However, since I’ve been eagerly anticipating Sunday, I think it's okay to lie a little.

"Go to bed. You’re saying weird things because you're sleep-deprived."
"Then sleep with me, Miyagi."
"Sleep by yourself, Sendai-san."
"If you let me use your lap as a pillow, I’ll sleep by myself.”

This is something I genuinely mean. If Miyagi agrees to let me, I’d willingly lie down. But I also know she’ll refuse, and thus I anticipate her next words.

"Sendai-san, are you stupid?"

As expected, her words are a bit boring.

"Then, let me give you a lap pillow, Miyagi."
"You don't need to."
"Then let's watch a movie. I'll sleep if I get tired; is that acceptable?"

"…What movie?"
"Anything but horror."

I smile at Miyagi as I suggest this, and she responds, "In that case, I’ll watch."

Though it turns out to be a Sunday different from what we had promised, I am not fixated on sticking to our promise. Therefore, I

stood up to fetch the tablet.

Miyagi's Time (III)

Part 337

In my line of sight, there's an empty glass and another glass half-filled with barley tea on the table.

When I lower my gaze, I see Miyagi curled up like a cat on the floor, using Pen-chan as her pillow.

And me, on the bed.

How on earth did things end up like this?

I try to think with my hazy mind. It's like looking through frosted glass, causing a furrow between my brows.

I remember Miyagi wanting to watch a romance movie, so we picked one together. I also recall getting drowsy halfway through and resting my head on Miyagi's shoulder.

Then, Miyagi, in a somewhat displeased tone, told me, "Sendai-san, you're heavy. If you're going to sleep, do it on the bed."

But after that, my memory is a blur. Even as I search my brain, I can't find anything.

While I'm unsure of what happened, I am certain that I woke up on the bed.

This means I must have done as Miyagi said and slept on the bed—or at least I think so.

I have no idea why Miyagi is sleeping on the floor.

After tapping just above my temples twice, I check the clock and see it's already 3:30, well past noon.

"...Why did things turn out like this?"

I probably slept well. I must have been out cold, to my surprise.

Proof of this is the clarity in my head upon waking up.

The details are sketchy, but I suspect Miyagi was considerate of my sleep-deprived state and let me rest.

I get that and know I should be grateful.

I know this, yet I can't shake the feeling that I've missed an opportunity to spend a Sunday with Miyagi. Even sleep-deprived, I wanted to watch the movie by her side and feel her presence. I wasn't aiming to spend a Sunday where I was the only one sleeping on the bed.

"Miyagi."

I call out towards the floor. But she's sleeping soundly and doesn't budge.

I get off the bed, pick up my smartphone from the table, and sit down beside Pen-chan. I snap a photo of the sleeping Miyagi before gently shaking her shoulder.

"Miyagi, wake up."

Without opening her eyes, Miyagi mumbles a groggy greeting, "Mornin'," in a voice that doesn't seem like she's awake.
However, there are no further words.

The "Morning" at this hour, which can't really be called morning, is just a formality, and Miyagi doesn't wake up.
I comb through her hair as she continues lying on the floor.

After planting a kiss on her cheek and urging her to wake up again, her eyes finally open.

"Good morning."

I greet her softly. Miyagi murmurs "Too close," and nudges my forehead.

"Sendai-san, what is it?"

Her words now more discernible than before.

"Why are you sleeping on the floor, Miyagi?"

I’m not complaining about her sleeping, just about the location.

The floor isn’t where Miyagi should sleep. She should sleep beside me.

"…I don’t know."

Still lying down, Miyagi answers.

"Are you still sleepy?"
"I'm not... awake now."

Miyagi murmurs as she sits up, rubbing her cheek marked by Pen-chan’s imprint. "What were we talking about?" she asks.

"Why were you asleep on the floor, Miyagi?"

"Watching you doze off made me sleepy too."

"You should have slept next to me. The floor's going to leave you sore."

"It doesn’t hurt. Did you sleep well, Sendai-san?"

"I did, but why was I sleeping on the bed?"

No matter how much I regret it, I can’t turn back time, so I won’t worry about sleeping, but I do think it was a waste.

Time with Miyagi is limited.

I wished to spend it awake, seeing her, rather than asleep, not seeing her.

"You were dozing off without watching the movie, so I put you to bed."

Miyagi draws her knees up, looking at me.

"You put me to bed? How?"

Did Miyagi carry me? That’s unthinkable. There’s no way.

I'm six centimeters taller than her, and even without the height difference, carrying a person barely conscious from sleep to a bed is nearly impossible.

"I said I'd go back to my room if you didn't get in bed."

She sounds grumpy.

"So that's why I went to bed?"

"You complained all the way to sleep."

I have no recollection of it whatsoever.

Thanks to that, I can't tell if Miyagi's words are true or not.

"Don't you remember?"

Miyagi's voice is chilly.

"I don't."

"Not even leaning against me trying to sleep?"

"I just rested a little, didn't I?"

"You were trying to sleep."

"I doubt that."

I remember resting my head on her shoulder.

But I only got slightly sleepy, and being close to Miyagi was solely what I wanted. It wasn't as if I intended to fall asleep.

Probably, definitely, it has to be.

"Sendai-san, you don't even remember."

With a disinterested tone, she presses Pen-chan against me.

"That's true."

I accept the squishy stuffed animal, staring intently at Miyagi.

She really can be stingy.

If her story is accurate, she should've just let me sleep beside her on the floor without insisting on the bed. If that wasn't possible, I would have preferred just being shaken awake.

"It was such a precious Sunday, and I wasted it," I mutter.

Sure, it was my fault for not getting enough sleep.

Miyagi simply considered my sleep-deprived state, so there's no blame on her, and we had no plans to go out anywhere. Still, I wished to enjoy the Sunday awake rather than asleep.

"Isn't it fine? Once in a while," Miyagi replies quietly.

Normally, I'd agree with her, but not today.

Miyagi's time and my time.

The days that they overlap are limited. I didn't intend to regret sleeping, but of course, I do anyway.

"Miyagi, please grant me a request."

I roll Pen-chan aside and take her hand.

"No way."

A cold refusal comes instantly, but she doesn't pull her hand away.

"I just want a mark."

"Don't I leave a mark on workdays?"

Indeed, she does leave a mark on me when she works. But those marks never feel permanent.

"They fade too quickly. Make a lasting one."

"It doesn't matter what kind of mark it is."

"…Do you always listen to Mio obediently?"

When I tightly grasp her hand and say that, Miyagi furrows her brows and looks at me.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Mio told me that you help her immediately whenever she asks for something."

"That's work."

"If you listen to Mio, couldn't you listen to me too?"

"Of course not. Yours are requests, not work."

She says with a distant voice and lets go of my hand, only to grab my clothes and pull me closer.

I yield to her pull, and her lips gently graze my neck, with teeth following soon after.

It's soft and tender.

She bites with a force unlike her usual self, and it's over quickly as she soon pulls her head back up.

"Is that it?"

No response comes when I ask. Instead, Miyagi's hand touches my neck, as if checking the chain of a necklace, and continues lingering there.

"Miyagi."

Even when I call her name, her lips don't find their way to me.

So, I press my lips against Miyagi's neck—again and again, gently kissing and pulling away.

Since Miyagi says nothing, I run my tongue along her neck.

It's slightly warm and firmer than her lips.

When I press more firmly, her warmth seeps in, and it feels comforting. I mimic her by grazing my teeth.

Softly, gently.

I bite.

"Hey, Sendai-san."

Miyagi, who is always unreserved, calls out to me hesitantly and lightly pushes my shoulder.

She’s unusually well-behaved today.

It’s not exciting. When I increase the pressure of my bite, though not quite as strongly as Miyagi usually is, her urging hand becomes firmer.

"Sendai-san!"

Her voice is tense with irritation, echoing in my ears, and she pushes me away.

"I didn’t say you could lick or bite. You're such a pervert, Sendai-san."

"Would you have preferred me licking your feet?"

When I trace her foot with my fingers, she swats my hand away.

"...Are you trying to annoy me into biting you?"

"That wasn't my intention, but would you if I did?"

"Why do you only say ridiculous things, Sendai-san?"

With an exasperated expression, Miyagi places Pen-chan between us on the floor. Now, a penguin is my neighbor, distancing Miyagi a bit.

I had no choice but to capture her hand and let my tongue glide over her fingers instead of her feet.

"Stop doing things like that so easily."

With words devoid of warmth, Miyagi's fingers slip away from the tip of my tongue.

Miyagi never follows my script.

Even actions that would normally provoke a mark from her don’t prompt one today.

She’s been different lately. But an unpredictable Miyagi is still "the usual Miyagi."

"What am I allowed to do, then?"

"Nothing, just stay still."

With a voice that could drop the temperature of the room five degrees, Miyagi says something "the usual Miyagi" might say and uses a tissue from the platypus to wipe her fingers.

Though I'm not happy about it, I accept "Miyagi" whether she is herself or otherwise, so I have no complaints about her request to do nothing.

"Well then, shall we eat? You haven’t had lunch yet, have you?"

"I haven't eaten... What time is it now?"

"It was 3:30 when I last checked."

Miyagi reacts to my words by checking the clock herself. She speaks with a surprised expression.

"In ten minutes, it’ll be four... Where did lunch hour go?"

"It vanished while we were asleep."

"Did you eat lunch, Sendai-san?"

"Do you think I did?"

"I doubt it."

"Let’s just have an early dinner then."

By the time everything is prepared, it’ll be around five.

Both of us are hungry, and since we skipped lunch, it wouldn’t hurt to eat a bit earlier.

"It's not evening yet."

"But I'm hungry. What do you feel like eating, Miyagi?"

"...Hamburg steak."

"I thought you might say that, so I bought the ingredients. Let’s make them together."

When I flash her a smile, Miyagi, surprisingly without complaint, simply says, "It's a promise," and heads toward the kitchen.

Miyagi's Time (IV)

Part 338

"I'll chop the onions, so Miyagi, prepare the frying pan."

The rice was already washed, and the rice cooker switch was turned on. All that remained was to make the hamburg steaks, and our roles for that task were determined from the beginning.

Although it's not an issue to entrust the chopping to Miyagi, as she's no longer a high school student, it's faster if I handle it.

"Got it."

Miyagi said as she brought over the frying pan.

With two of us in the kitchen, everything moved smoothly.

I prepared the knife and cutting board, slicing the onion into quarters. As I finished chopping one quarter into fine pieces, Miyagi walked towards the fridge saying, "I'll get the minced meat."

"Hold on a minute. We don't need the minced meat yet. It won't be used until the onions are sautéed and cooled."

"We don't need to sauté them today, right? We'll just mix it with the meat and grill it anyway. I'm hungry."

"I think it tastes better when sautéed. Just hang on a bit."

Stopping Miyagi's hasty approach to cooking, I asked her to put the remaining onions in the fridge. As I began sautéing the minced onions, Miyagi approached with a dissatisfied look, intently watching them to the point they might burn.

"Miyagi, you're really watching closely today, aren't you?"

I spoke without halting my work.

"I'm not watching."

An unhappy tone replied back, with an added "I'll wash the knife and cutting board."

"It's alright to leave them for now. We'll have some time while the onions cool, and I can wash them then."

"I'll wash them. Sendai-san, just keep your eye on the onions."

With a flat tone, Miyagi who was beside me began to wash the knife.

That signified a distance had formed between us, and it also meant I said something unnecessary.

That was a mistake.

While washing things ahead of time creates some breathing room, that's not what I want. What's important is not creating a little spare time, but having Miyagi by my side.

But I can't imagine Miyagi returning to my side even if I asked her to, right now.

I decided to quietly continue sautéing the onions, glaring at the frying pan.

Carefully, until golden brown.

Whenever I'm making hamburg steaks, I always take my time to sauté the onions. Today is no different, as I persistently fry them. The sounds of the frying pan sizzling and Miyagi washing dishes echo throughout the kitchen.

"...Sendai-san."

As the onions slowly reached a golden brown, Miyagi's voice reached me.

"What is it?"

"Did you learn cooking from your mom? You two used to get along, right?"

Miyagi returned to my side after finishing the dishes.

It's not a pleasant topic, but I do want to talk with Miyagi, and there's no longer a reason to hide it.

"Well, it's true we used to get along, but I didn't really learn from her. I just helped out a bit. I only seriously started to cook after my relationship with my family turned sour."

With the onions golden brown, I turned off the heat. While listening to Miyagi's emotionless "I see," I prepared a bowl. Taking some ground meat from the fridge and adding it to the bowl, I looked at Miyagi.

There's something I've been wanting to ask her but haven't managed to.

I always thought it's a question I shouldn't ask, but now I feel like it might be okay.

"...Can I ask you the same thing, Miyagi?"

"The same thing?"

"—About cooking."

To be precise, I want to hear about 'Miyagi's mom.'

"Can I handle mixing the minced meat?"

Miyagi spoke words unrelated to the question, dragging the bowl towards her.

I quietly told Miyagi, who started kneading the minced meat, "Knead it well," watching her hands intently.

Miyagi remained silent, kneading the minced meat.

Halfway through, I added salt, pepper, and nutmeg, having her knead more.

"...About cooking."

Miyagi mumbled.

But the words trailed off, as did her hands.

She looked at me instead of the bowl.

Our eyes met, and she wove together the end of her trailed-off sentence.

"Before I could learn, she left me."

"Eh?"

"I haven't seen my mom ever since."

Miyagi's words scattered like pieces of a puzzle, and I couldn't immediately understand. I began piecing together the answer to the abruptly thrown question in my head.

Miyagi's mother left her behind.

This happened before she learned to cook, and she hasn't seen her since, implying it's not a recent event. It likely dates back to when Miyagi was a child.

The part of Miyagi's past I couldn't grasp before connects to why she dislikes being alone in a house. It links to Miyagi, who was living on instant noodles, and to Miyagi, who prefers not celebrating birthdays with whole cakes. It connects to every Miyagi I've observed.

I'm glad to uncover a fragment of how Miyagi became who she is now.

But surely, I've made Miyagi reveal something she wished to keep hidden. Had she come to terms with her past, she likely would have shared it already, leaving me with something to say in response.

I'm sorry.

But before I could utter those words, Miyagi asked, "When do we add the onions?"

"Oh, we should add them now."

I soaked breadcrumbs in milk, adding them along with onions and a beaten egg. Then had Miyagi knead it again until it was evenly mixed.

"Sendai-san."

Miyagi called me without halting her work.

"What is it?"

"I'll get angry if you apologize."

A small, quiet voice reached me, to which I replied with a short "Okay."

"I'd like to shape the hamburg steaks, so can you teach me how?"

Miyagi asked, her voice not bright but without irritation.

Understanding that she was concerned for me warmed something deep inside my chest.

Miyagi is always like this.

She freezes me with words as cold as a north wind, yet unexpectedly surprises me with a warm southern breeze. The concept of "pleasant temperature" doesn't exist with her. She's always to one extreme or the other.

"I don't mind teaching you, but no 3D shapes."

"I know that," Miyagi replied, slightly dissatisfied. She once attempted to mold cookie dough like clay to form a 3D cat.

"We need to remove the air inside, so just copy what I do."

After dividing the mixture Miyagi made in half, I lightly shaped one portion into an oval. Tossing it between my hands to remove the air, I shaped it and lightly pressed the center before placing it on a plate.

"Got it?"

I inquired, seeing Miyagi pick up the remaining mixture.

Oddly enough, she shaped it into a circle, not an oval, tossing it between her hands to remove the air. After shaping it, she placed it on the plate.

Finally, as if completing a finishing touch, she pinched the two and ten o'clock positions on an imaginary clock and lightly pressed the center of the mixture.

"Cat ears?"

I asked Miyagi, who responded in a low voice, "Is there a problem?"

"It's cute."

I flashed a smile before heating the frying pan and adding oil.

While the oval and cat-shaped hamburg steaks cooked, I made a salad, and Miyagi finished the washing.

Once the hamburg steaks were cooked to perfection, I plated them alongside the salad. While I prepared the sauce and drizzled it over the steaks, Miyagi brought over rice and chopsticks, arranging them neatly on the table. The calico and black cat chopstick holders were, of course, placed in their usual spots.

All that remained was for me to carry over the plates with the hamburg steaks, but Miyagi took over that task.

"I'll carry them."

With a curt remark, she placed the plates on the table, setting the cat-shaped hamburg steak at the spot where I always sit.

"Isn't that one yours, Miyagi?"

"It's for you, Sendai-san."

Miyagi declared resolutely, taking a seat at the position marked by the calico cat chopstick holder.

"Why? Didn't you make the cat-shaped hamburg steak for yourself?"

"Sendai-san... I'm having fun today."

"Eh?"

The conversation was so disjointed that my response came out dumbfounded.

"We promised to tell each other when we're having a good time, so it's alright to say it in the middle of having fun, right?"

Her voice brought to mind the promise we made on the way back from the aquarium. I had indeed asked her to let me know whenever she was having fun. Miyagi remembered this promise clearly.

"So, enjoy that one... because it's more fun to eat something cute."

Miyagi muttered softly, adding, "Hurry up and sit down." I simply replied, "Thank you," and took my seat.

"Let’s eat."

We didn't coordinate, but our voices harmonized perfectly. I bit into the “ears” of the hamburg steak. As I chewed slowly, the meat juice and sauce melded exquisitely in my mouth.

Delicious. More so than anywhere else.

It's soft, fluffy—cooked perfectly, if I do say so myself. When I glanced at Miyagi, she commented, "I wanted to draw a face with the sauce."

"You should have said something sooner."

"Before I could speak, you poured the sauce."

"I feel bad about that, but if you want to do something like that, tell me early."

"Usually, if it's shaped like that, you'd draw it without needing to be told."

"You really do like cute things, don't you, Miyagi?"

"I don't 'like' them."

Miyagi retorted with a hint of dissatisfaction and took a big bite of her hamburg steak.

"Delicious."

I heard her soft voice. I took another bite and echoed, "Delicious." Perhaps because I skipped lunch, the hamburg steak was disappearing faster than I anticipated. Half of it vanished into my stomach, and soon, the other half followed suit.

I couldn't help but think I should have made a larger hamburg steak.

It was so delicious that my chopsticks never stopped.

When I looked over, Miyagi was about to take her last bite, and I watched her quietly. The hamburg steak disappeared into her mouth, was chewed, and then swallowed. Her chopsticks came to rest atop the calico cat chopstick holder.

"Sendai-san."

Miyagi addressed me.

"What is it?"

"Because your earrings are watching you eat, make sure you have proper meals on the days I work part-time."

On the days Miyagi works, my dinners tend to be pretty lackluster.

But I've assured her that I eat properly.

I don't know if she can see through my lie, but I promise, "I'll eat properly."

"The stone in those earrings... It's my birthstone, so please, don't break this promise."

The blue stones adorning my ears. It's sapphire—Miyagi's birthstone.

She still never told me outright that this blue stone is a sapphire. But for the first time, she acknowledges it as her birthstone. She says it's a part of herself.

"I understand."

Miyagi is worried about me. She's concerned for me. Though she hasn't explicitly said so, it's clear to see.

I like everything about Miyagi's existence, but perhaps it's parts like this that I love the most.

Her roundabout way of showing kindness creates a comforting atmosphere for me. I want to stay by Miyagi's side forever, experiencing the unique way she cares for me in a way that only I understand.

The Miyagi here now is not the one who is always with Utsunomiya or at work with Mio. She must be kinder to her friends in a more straightforward way, but the kindness she shows me is a special facet that no one else knows.

"And once we clean up here, we'll exchange the crocodile in my room with the platypus in yours."

Miyagi abruptly suggested something I didn't immediately comprehend.

"Exchange? Why?"

"So you can report to the crocodile that you've eaten after you have your meals when I'm at work. And say ‘I'm home’ too."

"Is that necessary?"

"...It feels like it might help with loneliness."

Miyagi mumbled as she stood up. Before she could clear the empty plates and bowl, I mustered a small request.

"Even with that, I might still feel a bit lonely."

Because Miyagi isn't there. It all comes back to that. The gap left by Miyagi can only be filled by Miyagi.

"You're greedy, Sendai-san."

"I suppose so."

"...Should I lend you the black cat plushie too?"

"Roro-chan?"

"Yes."

Miyagi's unusually kind today. Roro-chan is a plushie I gifted her, and sometimes it even sits on her bed.

The fact that she'd even offer it along with the crocodile means I must appear incredibly lonely.

"Just swapping the crocodile and platypus is enough."

The crocodile tissue cover can't fill the void completely, but knowing Miyagi is thinking about me helps me avoid focusing on the emptiness left behind.

Her part-time job won't last forever. There's a clear end in sight. Until that day comes, I'll sleep with the crocodile by my side, a constant companion of Miyagi's.

Chapter 117

I've Been Too Lenient with Sendai-san Lately (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 339

"Good morning."

Our morning greetings never change.

Whether it's before or after a Sunday where we spoke too much, Sendai-san and I exchange our "Good morning." Of course, "Good night," "I'm leaving," and "I'm home" are also part of our unchanged routine, bringing me a sense of relief in such consistency.

I'm glad that Sendai-san has returned to her usual self.

While it wasn't entirely unpleasant to have her undivided attention when she wasn't in a good mood, it's naturally better when she's full of energy.

"Shiori, do you have work today?"

I turn to Maika, sitting beside me, as she speaks. Our last lecture of the day has just finished, and Maika is as energetic as ever. I wish Sendai-san could feel similarly invigorated at university.

"Yeah."

I respond briefly, prompting Maika to put on an exaggerated grin and curiously say "Oh, really," leading me to ask, "What?"

"It's just that, I think it's amazing you're keeping up with your job, Shiori."

"It's not amazing. It's just normal."

Working at a part-time job is something anyone can do, so it's no

surprise that I'm managing to stick with mine. It's not something that should draw amazement now.

"You seemed so reluctant during the cultural festival café. It's hard to believe you're still working at a café."

"Well, it wasn't exactly fun," I admit.

Working at the café during the cultural festival doesn't hold the fondest memories. Sendai-san, who said she'd come, didn't show up, and acting as a hall staff member was overwhelming.

"I enjoyed it, though. Still, why didn't you pick a convenience store or a bookstore instead?"

"Even at a convenience store or bookstore, you still have to deal with customers."

"True. But if you can work at a café, once you're done with Mio-san's place, how about working with me?"

Maika gives me an innocent smile.

I'm only working because I have to, and once that reason's gone, I won't be working anymore. So there's no chance I'll be working with Maika, and this conversation isn't heading in a good direction.

Reluctantly, I decide to use the opportunity presented by the mention of a certain name.

"Speaking of Mio-san, Maika, what about her mixer? You were considering going, weren't you?"

Sendai-san, Maika, Mio-san, and me.

The four of us recently started exchanging messages in a group chat created after Maika and I swapped contact information with Mio-san when we gathered in Sendai-san's room. Mio-san later named the group "Strange Birds," a cryptic moniker, but we still communicate through it.

The mixer invite from Mio-san came through "Strange Birds" yesterday.

"Well, I'm still on the fence."

"Why?"

"Because you and Sendai-san aren't going."

Maika looks at me intently with something to say, then stands up. I rise as well, and together we exit the lecture room.

"Well, actually..."

As we walk down the corridor, Maika continues.

"When I asked Sendai-san about it, she mentioned that Mio-san's friends aren't weird."

"You asked Sendai-san about the mixer?"

I hadn't heard anything about this. Sendai-san hadn't mentioned it.

"I was curious."

Maika did nothing wrong. It's obvious she asked directly since it's not something she can discuss in "Strange Birds."

But hearing about Sendai-san from Maika's mouth isn't pleasant. A black haze clouds my heart, threatening to blur my vision.

"Was Sendai-san doing okay?"

Neither Maika nor Sendai-san is at fault, but as we talk, they start seeming that way, making me wish for the necklace sooner.

Putting a necklace around Sendai-san's neck won't solve everything. I know that, but if I had something tangible, I'm sure I would be able to become a better version of myself.

"She was okay. But Shiori, shouldn't you know better without asking me?"

"I'm just a bit concerned because Sendai-san seemed unwell lately due to her busy schedule."

"Is that so? She seemed okay, not just yesterday but before that too.

Is Sendai-san alright?"

Apparently, Sendai-san has been talking to Maika normally all along.

Mio-san mentioned the same thing when I spoke with her at work. Sendai-san has been behaving "normally."

So, the Sendai-san who claims to feel lonely only exists in front of me, which makes me feel special as a distinct presence in her life.

Thus, I end up saying things I wouldn't say to others, and doing things I wouldn't normally do with them.

"She's okay. She seems lively these days. I just wanted to check."

Smiling softly, I assure her, at which Maika looks relieved and says, "Alright then, as long as she's fine."

"You're definitely not going to the mixer, right, Shiori?"

"I'm not. But since they're Mio-san's friends, I'm sure they're fine."

Having worked together, I've learned that while Mio-san can be forceful, she never crosses any lines to make people uncomfortable. Her friends, who occasionally drop by the café, though lively and unlike those I usually associate with, all seem genuinely nice.

"I suppose I'll continue to mull it over for a while."

Maika murmurs, and after we leave the university chatting about work and recently bought manga, we part ways at the station.

Today’s my second shift since spending Sunday with Sendai-san. She has work today too, so she probably won’t feel lonely.

Days when Sendai-san has work used to be tough on me, but now, I think they're not so bad, since they help her forget her loneliness.

Sigh.

Entering the train, I exhale lightly.

I never realized just how vulnerable I am to the word "lonely."

No matter how long the time when something that should be there is missing, you can get through it by curling up in bed. After all, you can ignore the void in your heart by simply closing your eyes, making the idea of always lacking something seem normal, and wanting fulfillment seem trivial and foolish.

Always, always, ever since my mother vanished.

I've always tried to think this way, and I believed I succeeded.

So, hearing the word "lonely" wasn't supposed to affect me; it was something I'd just roll around in my mind, turning a blind eye. But because Sendai-san deliberately used the word "lonely," things went wrong.

The train sways gently, filled with a fair number of passengers. The scenery outside shifts, causing a sigh to escape.

Though I'd considered confiding in Sendai-san eventually, I certainly didn't expect "eventually" to be that Sunday.

I have no regrets about sharing, yet I feel a little uneasy because I've never shared my past with anyone before.

Sendai-san has gone back to the way she was before she said she was "lonely." Listening to the story of my mother hasn't changed anything. She doesn't look at me as though I'm a "pitiful child."

Being beside her is comforting, yet it feels strange, as if the child who once curled up under the covers has been exposed.

The train sways again and, after a while, stops at a station.

I pass a few stations, then exit the train and head towards my part-time job at the café. Entering through the staff entrance, I head to the locker room to change into my uniform.

"Morning, Shiori-chan!"

As I finish putting on my apron, Mio-sans's voice cheerfully echoes in the locker room.

"Technically, it's 'Good evening' around this time."

"It's a bit early for 'Good evening,' and 'Good afternoon' doesn't quite fit, so 'Morning' works. Anyway, looking forward to working with you today!"

Mio-san comes up beside me, speaking in an unnecessarily loud voice, and I return a moderately loud, "Looking forward to it as well."

"Shiori-chan, your energy is just as low as ever."

"Isn't it just that Mio-san has too much energy?"

"This is normal. You're the one with low energy, Shiori-chan."

"I don't think that's true. Anyway, I'm heading out."

If I kept talking with Mio-san, she'd probably insist on a loud "Looking forward to it!" from me. I intended to get to work a bit early, but Mio-san grabbed my arm.

"Wait a moment. How about inviting Hazuki over here?"

"Here, to this café?"

"Yes."

"For what purpose?"

"Hazuki mentioned wanting to visit you. I told her she could come if she wanted, but she said she doesn’t want you to see her when you're busy working. So, how about inviting her?"

Mio-san quickly explains, releasing my arm as she finished.

"Did Sendai-san tell you to say that to me?"

"Hazuki didn't say anything. This is just me talking. It doesn't matter to me whether she comes or not, but just think about it."

With a beaming smile, Mio-san said this, giving me a playful pat on the back.

I've Been Too Lenient with Sendai-san Lately (II)

Part 340

Work isn't exactly fun, but I don't dislike it.

Sometimes I take orders or deliver dishes, and somehow, I manage. If someone told me to go back to my high school days and run a café at the cultural festival again, I'd have no choice but to refuse. However, when it comes to this job, I think I'd be willing to do it again.

But if someone were to ask me if Sendai-san could come see me at work——.

I absolutely don’t want that.
Under no circumstances.
Bringing her here is out of the question.

"Shiori-chan, can you take care of the hall?"

Mio-san says, to which I curtly respond, "I'm going."

Today, the café is bustling.

Even Mio-san, who had irresponsibly joked in the changing room about inviting Hazuki here, is working with a serious expression. Although I'm not fond of working the hall, now is not the time to complain.

I take a deep breath and release it before heading into the hall, but Mio-san adds, "Senpai is here, but you can just ignore her," stopping me in my tracks.

I inhale once more, then very slowly exhale.

The senpai that Mio-san is referring to is Noto-san, a person I would prefer to avoid if possible.

The memory of meeting her at Maika's workplace is too terrible. My image of Noto-san has been stuck like that since then, without any updates.

I clutch my chest in my uniform and step into the hall.

Even though I don't want to look, I scan the restaurant, and there she is, Noto-san, waving at me from her usual spot. I offer a vague smile, then guide a customer who just entered the café to their seat.

Since I started working here, I've seen Noto-san numerous times inside the restaurant, yet she's never spoken to me. That's because when I'm working the hall, it's always busy, and even if she did call out, I wouldn't have the capacity to interact with her.

Thus, sending a tentative smile her way is all I need to do.

In part thanks to Mio-san's considerations.

Feeling Noto-san's gaze on me, I go about my duties in the hall. It's uncomfortable, but realizing that I can work without incident in the hall is all thanks to Mio-san's thoughtfulness, I can't outright dismiss her suggestions.

Perhaps I should consider inviting Sendai-san here.

——No, it's just not possible.

Right now, the only one watching me is Noto-san, so it's just a bit uncomfortable, but if Sendai-san were watching, I'd definitely be nervous. I'd surely make unnecessary mistakes.

"Shiori-chan, you're all set in the hall. Thank you."

After some time has passed, the manager calls to me, and I head back into the kitchen.
While washing dishes, Mio-san talks to me.

"Shiori-chan, you really don't like senpai, do you?"
"It's not that I dislike her, it's more like..."

Noto-san is close with Mio-san.
Thinking about that causes me to falter. Even lying to say I'm not uncomfortable with her isn't possible.

"Shiori-chan, you're such a kind girl. Well, there are quite a few folks who don't quite get along with senpai, so don't worry about it. She's not a bad person, just a bit difficult to understand."

Mio-san says brightly, adding, "It's okay to find her difficult, but it'd be nice if you didn't dislike her."

"I'll try."

Although it seems challenging, I feel like I have no choice but to respond that way. As new orders come in, Mio-san starts making sandwiches.

With hands moving as if by magic.
I don't know if she's as skilled a cook as Sendai-san, but in no time at all, she assembles the sandwiches and beautifully plates them.

"Shiori-chan, could you handle the drinks?"
"Got it."

I prepare an iced tea.

Mio-san is still someone I find a little difficult. However, since starting this job, the words "nice person" have been added to her description. Perhaps once I know her better, the term "difficult" might vanish.

This job has taught me many things.

If it weren't for this job, I wouldn't have become close enough with Mio-san to chat casually like we do now. I wouldn't have even jokingly considered the possibility of not finding her difficult one day.

And.
I wouldn't have known there'd come a time when Sendai-san would say she's lonely in such a way.

Because of that, I feel off balance and can't seem to return to my usual self.

It's genuinely bothersome.

I absolutely don’t want to invite Sendai-san here, though.

I'm really not keen on having her see me working here.

I genuinely, absolutely, unquestionably refuse, yet when I remember Sendai-san saying she was lonely, those feelings waver, so I prefer not to remember.

I shove thoughts of Sendai-san out of my head and focus on my work.

Carrying out kitchen tasks, making appearances in the hall, and successfully not thinking about Sendai-san. Before I know it, time flies by, I leave the café, and board the train—still not thinking about Sendai-san.

Whether I’m walking down streets with no sign of a calico cat, climbing stairs, or now opening the front door, I don't recall what Mio-san said to me.

I close and lock the front door behind me.
Seeing Sendai-san's shoes at the entrance causes a crease to form between my brows.

I exhale, and with my index finger, I smooth the wrinkle away. Quietly, I walk down the hallway, entering the shared space.

"Welcome back."

Before I can say anything, Sendai-san’s voice greets my ears.

"I'm home."

I reply with a voice neither too loud nor too soft, and Sendai-san, smiling cheerfully, says, "Welcome back," again.

"I've been waiting for Miyagi."

Before I can repeat my greeting, Sendai-san stands up from her chair. Approaching me with the intention of an imminent kiss, I push her stomach with my hand to maintain some distance.

"I can see that. Did you eat dinner?"
"I made sure to eat and reported it to the crocodile."

"Good."

"So, what will Miyagi do now?"

Today, work was busy, and I'm tired, so I want to take a bath and sleep.

I want to say that, but saying that might seem too dismissive. It feels harsh not to spend time with someone who waited for me.

"…I have something to tell Sendai-san, so stay here."

I don't have anything specific in mind.
But I think I should at least spend a little time with her.

I retreat to my room and greet the platypus I swapped with the crocodile on Sunday with a "I'm home."

I don't usually greet the tissue cover, but since I made Sendai-san promise to report her meals and greetings to the crocodile, I can't possibly skip doing so myself.

I place my bag down and stroke the platypus' head.

"The staff meal was delicious."

After relaying details of dinner, I return to the shared space.

"I bought pudding. Want to eat together?"

I hear Sendai-san's voice, and looking at the table, I see pudding and spoons already set out.

"It's not like I have a choice not to eat."
"Does Miyagi not want pudding?"
"…I'll have some."

I sit across from Sendai-san, say "Let's eat," and hear her echo my sentiment.

I open the pudding lid and take a bite.
It's a slightly firm baked pudding, with a subtle egg flavor that fills my mouth.

"So, Miyagi. What's the matter?"

Sendai-san takes a spoonful of pudding and looks at me intently.

If I absolutely have to say something, there are two things I want to discuss.

One is the story about the mixer, or to be more precise, the details of Sendai-san's conversation with Maika about the mixer.

What did Maika ask, and what did Sendai-san talk about?

I'm curious, but I also feel there's no point in asking.

It's not polite to pry into what friends talk about, and even if I did ask, I doubt there would be anything interesting, so there's no real point in pursuing it.

That leaves only one other topic, and it's not something I'm eager to discuss.

"You said you had something to talk about, right?"

Perhaps noticing my silence, Sendai-san prompts me again.

"I forgot."

"You're lying. There's something, isn't there?"

Her tone isn't particularly forceful, but there's an urgency in Sendai-san's voice as she tries to nudge me.

I scoop some pudding with my spoon and bring it to my mouth.
As I bite slowly, I think it might be a tad too sweet.
I take another bite and glance at Sendai-san.

"Miyagi."

When she calls my name, I set my spoon down.
Reluctantly.
Grudgingly.
With no other choice, I open my tight-lipped mouth.

"…Do you still want to come to the café where I'm working?"

I know I should probably talk about something else, but I don't have another topic.

Telling her that I didn’t see the calico cat on the way home is pointless, and a rundown of how my university classes went today is even less relevant. So, this is the topic we’re left with.

"What brought this on?"

"Mio-san mentioned that you said you want to visit the café."

"…I see."

I hear a sigh intermingled with her words.

"Thanks to Mio-san, I'm stuck having to ask if you want to come to the café. Really, she’s such a meddler."

I blurt this out, and Sendai-san gives a troubled smile.

"Yeah, but that’s one of her good qualities."

Though I brought up the topic myself, seeing Sendai-san genuinely compliment Mio-san makes me want to stand up and retreat to my room.

I think it’s only natural for Sendai-san and Mio-san to get along. Yet, it doesn’t sit well with me.

"Sendai-san… did you ask Mio-san to persuade me to let you come to the café?"

"Why would I? Besides, I didn’t think Mio would discuss it with you."

"Really?"

"Really."

Sendai-san says this with a serious face, then calls my name softly.

"Miyagi, would it be okay if I came to see you at work?"

Her voice is gentle.
She doesn't say she "wants to come."
She's patiently waiting for my response.

"…Do you want to come that much?"

"If you say it's okay," she answers in a strangely earnest tone.
She seeks my permission.
I understand this.

But I don't want to say it's "fine."

I realize I don't want Sendai-san watching me work. It's not that I want to appear particularly competent, but if she comes to the café, she'll inevitably see my shortcomings, which makes me hesitate.

"…Please don't come."

I quietly reply, and in a light tone, Sendai-san answers.

"I figured you'd say that."

I thought she'd push back, but she simply resumes eating her pudding without another word.

Guilt gnaws at me.
It feels like I've done something terribly wrong.

"It's delicious."

Her gentle voice reaches me.
I take another bite of my pudding.
Sweet.
I can't discern if it's good or not.

"I thought you might break your promise not to come to the café while I'm working," I murmur.

Sendai-san pauses her hand with the pudding spoon.

"Isn't that harsh? …Though, to be honest, I did think about sneaking in. But last Sunday, you were so kind; it made me extremely happy, and I didn't want to betray you."

Sneaky.
It's sneaky to say something like that at a time like this.

"Sendai-san, give me yours."

I point at the pudding container in front of her.

"You mean my pudding?"

"Yes. The one you're eating right now."

"But it's half-eaten."

"It's fine, just give it to me."

When I glare at her, Sendai-san reluctantly slides her pudding over to me.
Ignoring my own, I eat hers instead.

"Miyagi, does my pudding taste good?"

"It's delicious."

The two puddings on the table are the same.
Yet they taste different to me.

Somehow, Sendai-san's pudding tastes better.

After finishing the pudding she gave me, I call out to her.

"Sendai-san."

"What?"

"In return for the pudding, if you really want to come, you can visit the café, just for a little while."

"Eh?"

She sounds surprised, her voice a tad louder.

"Mio-san said I should invite you."

"Mio did?"

"Yes."

"Even though you told me not to come, you’re listening to Mio? When did you two get so close?"

"We're not exactly close, but that’s just how the conversation went."

Sendai-san stares at me with furrowed brows.
But that expression quickly fades, replaced by a low utterance, "I see."

"If you don’t want to come, that’s fine," I try to conclude.

Before I can, Sendai-san, looking flustered, put on a smile and declares in a strong voice, "I’ll definitely come."

I've Been Too Lenient with Sendai-san Lately (III)

Part 341

"I'll be late today because of a shift."

I inform Sendai-san, who is chewing on her toast slathered with jam and butter.

"Got it."

Saturday mornings are peaceful and quiet. Even if I say I'm working, Sendai-san doesn't ask me to do anything unnecessary like "Watch me eat breakfast."

We are enjoying a slightly later breakfast in a calm atmosphere.

"And just so you know, today is the only day you can come to the café."

The hand that was about to eat scrambled eggs pauses.

"…Today's the only day I can come?"
"Yes."
"I just asked yesterday if I could visit you at work."
"I never said you could come anytime."

Even Sendai-san twists her words to suit her needs sometimes, so she shouldn't have any complaints against me.

"Then, can I go with you now?"
"No. Come later."

I state firmly and take a bite of my toast.

The toast with jam and butter, something I've had countless times for breakfast, is sweet, slightly salty, and delicious. No matter how many times I eat it, I never get tired of it.

"Miyagi, you sure are stingy," she says with a displeased expression.

"If you don't like it, you don't have to come."
"I'm definitely coming today."

With conviction, she resumes eating her scrambled eggs.

Back in high school, she said she might come to the cultural festival café, but she ended up not coming. Even today, it wouldn't be strange if she decided not to come, just like back then.

In fact, I'd prefer if she didn't come today.

"You don't have to force yourself."
"I'll definitely be there."

Sendai-san gives me a smile and takes a bite of her toast.

I do the same, finishing the rest of my toast. I eat the ham, the scrambled eggs, and empty the salad plate as well.

Though it's not yet time to rush off to my shift, the thought of Sendai-san showing up makes me uneasy.

"Thanks for the meal."

When I stand up, Sendai-san calls out.

"I'll tidy up, so you can go get ready."

"Thanks."

I respond briefly and head to my room. I put myself together and pace around the room, sitting on the bed, standing up again, and walking around.

I keep doing needless things, trying to kill time.

Even though there's not much to prepare, staying in my room doesn't put me in a relaxed mood. I wish this day that has just started would already be over.

I'm not at my lowest, but I'm feeling quite gloomy.

Even if Sendai-san comes to the café, what I have to do won't change. I'll just do what I always have to.

I know this, yet my heart feels restless, and my stomach feels as if someone is gripping it tightly. I feel like I might get sick, so I take a slow deep breath.

It's still a bit early for my shift, but I aimlessly check the contents of my bag and leave the room. The shared space is empty of Sendai-san.

Maybe she won't show up after all.

Thinking that makes me feel dissatisfied, like back in high school. It's as if an invisible cloth wraps around me, making me reluctant to go to work.

With a sigh, Sendai-san emerges from her room.

"Are you off to work already, Miyagi?"
"Yeah."
"Don't come home halfway through your shift, okay?"
"Why would you say that?"
"Because I'll definitely come today. If you're not there when I arrive at the café, I'll be disappointed."
"I won't leave halfway."
"Promise."

With that, she tries to kiss the earring, an unnecessary gesture, prompting me to step on her foot.

"No need for such promises."

Earrings aren't meant for promises that may not be kept. Sendai-san has a history of not showing up at events like the "cultural festival."

I lightly kick her leg and softly bite her neck without leaving a mark.

Raising my head, I look at Sendai-san.

"I'm off."

I say quietly, and she replies, "See you."

I don't mind working, but the thought of Sendai-san coming makes me anxious. Still, I can't skip work, so I leave the house with a heavy heart, dragging my feet toward the café.

I walk on the sidewalk, board the train, and reach the café unaware of the weather outside, either sunny or cloudy. Entering through the staff entrance, I change into my uniform in the dressing room. Though someone spoke to me along the way, I can't quite recall the conversation. Before I knew it, I was in the kitchen washing dishes.

"Shiori-chan, Hazuki's here."

Four hours into the shift, Mio-san's buoyant voice reaches me, and my view darkens.

I don't want this.
I want to go home.
—But if I stay in the kitchen, I'll be safe.

"…She did mention she'd come today."
"You told Hazuki about that conversation?"
"I told her not to come…"

I can't help but sound hesitant. Mio-san seems thrilled that Sendai-san is here, but I find no joy in it.

"Shiori-chan, want to try working the floor?"
"Uh, no thanks."
"Oh, don't say that. Since Hazuki's here, at least take her order."
"It's not too busy right now, is it?"
"Not busy is exactly why you should go. It's fine to chat a little while."

Mio-san encourages me with a smile brimming with pure goodwill.

"But…"
"It's okay. You're cute as always today, Shiori-chan."
"That's not the point."
"Sure, it is. Go on, check on Hazuki."

Her goodwill multiplies, tightening in my stomach.

"I'll swap with you for a bit, Shiori-chan."

Mio-san makes the announcement on her own and pushes me into the hall. I reckon "helpfulness" is a word meant specifically for Mio-san.

Though I know she's not being malicious, this isn't the situation I wanted. Yet, I can't voice any complaints and get pushed out onto the floor, where I spot Sendai-san.

"Go take Hazuki-chan's order."

The manager, possibly in cahoots with Mio-san, cheerfully pats my shoulder.

Since Sendai-san worked here before, the manager knows her well. Naturally, when I step out onto the floor, this happens.

I don't want to go, but given the circumstances, I reluctantly approach Sendai-san.

My throat is dry.

I'm not sure if I'm walking properly. Spotting me, Sendai-san waves slightly.

What should I do?

There's no way I can smile at Sendai-san. But I can't serve her with a sour face either.

I clench and then open my fist.

I lift the corners of my mouth just a bit, making sure not to appear unfriendly. I can't sound as bright as Mio-san, but I try not to be too subdued.

"…Have you decided on your order?"

Standing before Sendai-san, I muster all my effort to utter the standard line.

Chapter 118

The Unfamiliar Face of Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 342

Miyagi rarely smiles in front of me—almost never, really.

Her expressions are usually the opposite of a smile: displeased, disgruntled, or simply uninterested. She doesn't need to be asked to show those faces. However, she rarely ever smiles, to the point that I wonder if she's cursed to die if she laughs.

I did see her smile at the aquarium, but that wasn't directed at me.

Yet today, she's smiling at me.

I know it's not a smile from the heart, but it doesn't matter. Whether it's fake, forced, awkward, or almost too clumsy to even be called a smile, the fact that Miyagi is lifting the corners of her mouth in front of me is what matters.

I'm glad I came to this cafe.
I'm glad I didn't sneak off without telling Miyagi.

"Sorry. I haven't decided on my order yet."

I direct a smile at what I absolutely wanted to see: "Miyagi working at a cafe."

"Are you ready to order?" she asks, her voice rigid as her facial muscles make a half-hearted attempt at a smile.

"Let's see... what's the recommended menu item?"
"Recommended menu, you ask?"
"Yes, any recommendations?"
"Anything, really."

Miyagi gives me a half-hearted glare but restrains herself. Her lips

start to droop, but she manages to maintain a semblance of a service smile. Apparently, Miyagi can smile through sheer willpower when she's working. It’s amusing but also not.

Watching Miyagi put effort into smiling in front of me makes her look endearing enough that I want to keep watching her. Even though I wasn’t keen on her getting a part-time job, I now think having one is a good thing.

But when I think about Mio or the other staff seeing Miyagi's smile frequently, it suddenly becomes dull, and I wish she’d quit immediately.

Seeing the Miyagi I don’t know reveals conflicting feelings within me, making me yearn to see the Miyagi that I do know. I want to reach out and confirm that the person in front of me is the “usual Miyagi,” but I can’t do that here.

A cafe is no place for such actions, and naturally, Noto-senpai is here too.

"Miyagi, maybe you should drop that formal speech?"

I flash a smile, banishing the “discordant thoughts” swirling inside me, and continue.

"I think it’s okay to speak normally now."

I timed my visit during a quiet period, so there aren’t many customers. During this time, chatting with a customer won’t get her in trouble, nor will it be a problem for her to speak normally.

"It’s not like you don’t know the recommendations already, Sendai-san."

Miyagi mumbles in a low, small voice, likely wanting to say that when she glared at me earlier.

"I don't know the latest recommendations, so tell me."

I had heard from Mio that the new recommendation at the cafe is a melon-based dessert. Asking Miyagi wasn't about finding out the recommendation, but more to keep her here with me.

"The current favorite is the melon parfait."

Just as expected, Miyagi says it.

"Not the shop's recommendation, what's yours, Miyagi?"
"None. Decide for yourself."
"Come on, tell me something that sounds like a recommendation. You've got to have something."
"..."

Miyagi looks at me silently. The friendly smile she had moments ago has vanished, replaced by a frosty stare.

If we were at home, I'd probably have my foot stepped on, but since she's at work, she simply discards the mask of a smile without retaliating.

"If there's no recommendation, I'll have to decide for myself."

I want to talk more with Miyagi, but I don't want to anger someone who's working. I lower my gaze to the menu and glance at the parfait that Miyagi recommended.

It looks delicious.
But it's not what I'm craving.

As I hum thoughtfully, I hear Miyagi's voice, coated in a layer of bitter chocolate discontent.

"Cheesecake and cold brew iced coffee."
"Is that your recommendation, Miyagi?"

Raising my gaze from the menu, I see Miyagi's face, utterly bereft of any customer-friendly expression expected of a cafe staffer.

"Probably."
"You don't sound too confident."
"Then choose something else if you don't want it."
"It's fine. I'll go with Miyagi's recommendation."
"Just wait a bit."

She doesn't even repeat my order. Half of her body is already heading toward the kitchen.

There’s no need for her to leave so quickly, but she’s hurrying back to her work.

"Miyagi, wait."
"Do you want to order more?"
"Your uniform looks great on you."

When I smile at Miyagi, who’s turned her body towards me with a perplexed look, her forehead twitches slightly.

I don’t need words to understand.
She doesn’t like what I said.
Her expression says it all.

But the words I uttered weren’t meant to hold her back. They were my genuine feelings.

"That’s not an order."
"I didn’t say it was. I just wanted to tell you it looks good on you."
"…It doesn’t suit me. Sendai-san looked better in it. You’re looking pretty stylish today too."
"Thanks, but I think it suits you better, Miyagi."

I still have mixed feelings about Miyagi working part-time.
Yet, she fits the role so well that I almost wish she’d continue working here.

"Sendai-san, you lie so easily."
"It’s the truth."
"I’m going back."

Miyagi says in a low voice.

Just another minute.
Even thirty more seconds would suffice for Miyagi to stay here with me.

That’s what I was thinking, but Miyagi vanishes into the kitchen at double the speed at which she came to take my order, leaving me alone at the table.

I know this cafe well.
I’ve worked here longer than Miyagi, so I probably know it better than she does.

That makes it easy to imagine what Miyagi is doing upon returning to the kitchen. However, I'm intrigued by what exactly she's up to in there.

What kind of conversations she's having with Mio.
What she's discussing with the manager.
What she chats about with her coworkers.
Whether she's showing a smile I never get to see, enjoying herself.

I feel like storming into the kitchen to find out, and I want to work with her. But since neither is feasible right now, I wish she'd stay in my line of sight.

Cheesecake and cold brew iced coffee hardly matter.

I'm ready to abandon my role as a cafe customer and take Miyagi back where she belongs. I want to swap places with Mio.

"Too bad it's impossible."

I let out a small sigh.
Ever since Miyagi started working here, Mio has become more earnest.

She regularly works, previously only appearing when they were short on hands, and keeps me updated on Miyagi. She tells me everything from A to Z, or more like from 1 to 100, about "Shiori-chan."

I'm happy, yet also annoyed.

Rather than seeing Miyagi through Mio's eyes, I want to see her myself and know what she's doing. Even though I'm watching her work right now, it's not enough. I want to see more of Miyagi.

And I want her to see more of me.

I want her to look at me, to talk with me, not with Mio, the manager, or her coworkers.

Ever since Miyagi started her part-time job, there are more moments when I don't feel like I belong to her.

I understand her need to work.
I know it can’t be helped.
But I don’t know how to handle these feelings.

Maybe it’s because I’ve only ever interacted with people at a moderate distance, with moderate emotions. When I’m with Miyagi, whose presence demands closeness and intense emotions, everything else pales in comparison.

With a sigh, I take a sip of water.
The glass remains nearly full.
I glance around the cafe.
Familiar faces are at work.
Even Noto-senpai is in her usual seat.

I sigh again.
Waiting for Miyagi feels long.
What I ordered shouldn't take so much time, and yet, the wait drags on. I wish Miyagi would return soon.

And so I wait, sighing all the while.

Five minutes, maybe ten.
Perhaps less, perhaps more.
Time passes in an indeterminate way until I hear a cheerful voice.

"Thank you for waiting. Here are your cheesecake and cold brew iced coffee."

With practiced hands, Mio places the cheesecake and cold brew on the table.

Bright.
Friendly.
Exasperatingly so.

"Why is it you bringing them over…" I grumble, looking at Mio, who’s carrying the tray with a beaming smile.

The Unfamiliar Face of Miyagi (II)

Part 343

"Hey, Hazuki, that's mean. Am I not good enough for you?"

Mio continued with a cheerful voice.

I have no qualms with Mio; she hasn't done anything wrong. The blame lies with me, for hoping that Miyagi would come back here once again.

I glanced at the cheesecake and cold brew iced coffee that Mio had placed before me, then forced a smile at her.

"No complaints at all. I'm glad it's you who brought them."

"Sounds a bit fake to me."

"I'm serious."

I insist with a smile, to which Mio responds with a beaming grin, "Maybe I'd believe you if you praised me a little more."

There's no real obligation to humor Mio's childish games, but it's true that I wasn't very gracious earlier, and I owe Mio. Without her, I wouldn't have had the chance to see Miyagi at her part-time job.

Mio, you're super cute.
You're beautiful today as well.

I say with a smile, and she replies, "Maybe I'll forgive you now." With my penance done, I ask her the question I've been meaning to, "So, Mio, is Miyagi busy?"

"Not really. More like she's barricaded herself in the kitchen, becoming a dishwashing enthusiast."

"I see."

I'm sure that her coming out to take an order earlier was nothing

short of a miracle, and that miracle was likely Mio's doing. I should be grateful to her, but everything I say now seems to turn out wrong.

I nearly sigh but instead clench my fist tightly.

Gazing into the glass, I debate whether to drink the cold brew iced coffee when Mio's bright voice breaks through.

"Shiori-chan is cute, right? I understand why you'd want to be like a mom to her, Hazuki."

The unexpected comment catches my attention, and I lift my eyes.

"What do you mean?"

Though I've heard Mio's "Shiori-chan updates" many times, I've never heard anything like this before.

"Even though she’s so wary around me, she still depends on me sometimes. It’s adorable. She tackles things she’s not good at very seriously. She's like a little animal, maybe a hamster, or a squirrel... no, that's not quite right. There's just something cute and animal-like about her."

I want to say "cat" but hold back. I'm the only one allowed to think of Miyagi as a cat.

More than that, I'm curious about this version of Miyagi that emerges from Mio's words.

Mio sees a side of Miyagi I don't know. She observes Miyagi doing things she'd never do in front of me.

If it were Utsunomiya, I might accept it. Utsunomiya's known Miyagi longer than I have, and they're best friends. But Mio is different; she met Miyagi after I did, and until recently, they weren't even friends.

Yet despite this—

"She's a type I've never encountered before, and it's honestly fascinating. It makes me want to care for her."

Mio says with a cheerful smile. To my knowledge, none of her friends are like Miyagi. Maybe that's why she finds her intriguing and cute.

I take a sip of the cold brew iced coffee. Despite Miyagi's suggestion, it doesn't taste particularly good.

"Thanks to you, Hazuki, I've come to know such an interesting person, and I'm grateful."

Mio's voice echoes in my ears.

I'm not happy.
I don't want gratitude.

I'm the only one who should think of Miyagi as cute and wish to care for her. I'm the only one who should be grateful for meeting her. Miyagi is important to me, but she shouldn't become important to others.

So, I don’t want Mio to get to know Miyagi any more than she already does.

But I can't voice these thoughts, so I drown them with the cold brew iced coffee, letting the bitterness coat my unspoken feelings.

"Mio, don't you need to head back to work?"

Plastering a smile on my face, I ask Mio, hoping to hear something I want.

"Hello, Sendai-chan."

From behind Mio, Noto-senpai appears, smiling exaggeratedly.

"Hello."

"Were you able to have a good time with Miyagi-chan?"

Noto-senpai, with her light-hearted tone, approaches our table.

"Very much."

I reply with a smile, and Mio follows up earnestly, "Senpai, don't set

your sights on Shiori-chan."

"Don't worry, it's Sendai-chan I'm after."

Noto-senpai grins at Mio, eyes narrowed.

"Then that's fine. I've found someone to chat with Hazuki now, so I'll head back to work. You two get along."

Leaving those casual words behind, Mio returns to the kitchen, and Noto-senpai speaks with a cheerful demeanor.

"Sendai-chan, your beautiful face is looking a bit scary."

I had received a job referral thanks to Noto-senpai; she's been quite helpful, and I don't think she's a bad person. Yet, I can't wholeheartedly believe she's a good person either.

"You haven't been talking to Miyagi, have you?"

I didn't mean it, but my voice drops.

"Right out of the blue with that?"

"Please, let me know."

"What did Miyagi-chan say?"

Noto-senpai sits across from me without asking for permission, and without me offering.

"She said she hasn't spoken to you."

"Then that's that."

"Is it?"

"Don't you trust Miyagi-chan?"

Despite her tease, I trust Miyagi, even if at times it's hard to believe. I want to trust her. But I don't trust Noto-senpai.

As I silently gaze at her, she reassures me, "It's okay."

"I really haven't talked to her, so don't worry. Mio's told me not to talk to the newbie."

"I remember asking you not to get involved with Miyagi too."

"It's about prioritizing Mio, you see."

"Prioritizing Mio—"

Before I can finish my sentence, Noto-senpai cuts in, pointing towards the kitchen.

"Sendai-chan, look over there."

"Miyagi..."

A name slips out, belonging to the one who looks like a cat only to me.

Miyagi, who didn't bring the cold brew iced coffee and cheesecake earlier, is heading over with something in hand.

But she's moving unusually slow.
So slow that it wouldn't be strange if she stopped.

"Sendai-chan is scary, so I'll head back to my seat."

Saying that, Noto-senpai stands up. Smiling, she mentions, "See you at university," and walks back to her original seat, seemingly avoiding any interaction with Miyagi.

It seems she truly is refraining from speaking to Miyagi after all.

I feel bad for doubting her.
I should probably chase after her to apologize, but I can't bring myself to stand because Miyagi is in my line of sight. As I continue to watch, she slowly approaches my table.

"Mio-san said, 'Bring some water.'... But, it looks like you don't need any, Sendai-san."

Miyagi stands in the same spot she did when she took my order, glancing at the glass of water. It's completely untouched, not a millimeter of water has been sipped.

"I'll drink it now."

I take a gulp, reducing the volume in the glass slightly.
Miyagi fills the glass back to where it was before.

Mio can be meddlesome, but the more you get to know her, the better a person she is. Without her, Miyagi wouldn't have come back to my table again.

While I find her tendency to drag others into group outings somewhat questionable, I do believe she's someone I should get along with, even without Miyagi's suggestion. She shouldn't be categorized with my high school friends.

That's what I think, yet there are moments when I just want to distance myself from Mio, who is getting to know sides of Miyagi I haven't seen.

"You don't need any more, right?"

I hear Miyagi's voice—neither bright nor dull.

"I do."

I drink another third of the water and place the glass back down.
Miyagi refills it and looks at me.

No matter what Miyagi says, I doubt I'll grow any closer to Mio than I am now. I've gotten used to superficial interactions and can't bring myself to delve into Mio's heart.

When my family dynamics changed, I shifted the distance with my friends.

I draw lines to separate.
I don't go beyond them.

The world, divided by lines I've drawn, is a bit barren, but once accustomed to it, it's easy to live in.

By marking my territory as a restricted zone, I can prevent deep connections and maintain peace of mind.

It’s simpler to maintain relationships at a distance, just far enough to keep smiling but not close enough to remember names without being called. It allows me to savor only the enjoyable parts of school life. Even if friendships fade, it's something I'm resigned to.

I take a sip of the water Miyagi poured.

"Too much of that, and it'll upset your stomach," Miyagi remarks with mild exasperation.

"I'm thinking of drinking it until it’s empty."

Pointing at the water pitcher, I receive a response, "You're such an idiot."

Miyagi is the only one who calls me an idiot like that.

She quietly entered the space I’d marked as off-limits and made it her own. What was once barren has been suffused with Miyagi's presence, and now it cannot do without her.

Like this glass that Miyagi keeps filling with water, I'm constantly replenished by her presence at all times.

I take another sip of water.
Miyagi refills the glass, even though barely any water has been reduced.

"Well then, I'm heading back to the kitchen."

With a curt remark, Miyagi turns to leave.

"Wait. Miyagi, your shift is almost over, right? Do you want to walk home together?"

"I don't."

Miyagi replies, looking straight at me.

"I'll wait outside."
"...Outside, the whole time?"

"I'll kill time nearby and come back around when you’re done."

"You don’t have to wait."

With those words, Miyagi turned her back on me.

The Unfamiliar Face of Miyagi (III)

Part 344

The ideal distance is side by side. If that's not possible, then a step or two ahead.

If we're walking together, that's the kind of proximity I'd prefer, but Miyagi is walking about five steps ahead of me.

And she's walking quite briskly.

It doesn't have to be as slow as a tortoise, but if possible, I wish she'd walk at a normal pace. However, she's not planning to listen to me. Five minutes ago when I suggested, "How about slowing down?", she refused. And a minute ago when I asked, "Could you walk a bit slower?", she rejected that too.

Miyagi continues to walk through the evening streets without looking back. Meanwhile, I keep walking behind her.

"...I told you there's no need to wait for me."

A voice that sounds overly displeased comes from about five steps ahead.

"When I was working part-time, you came along, so when you're working, shouldn't we go home together to be fair?"

When I worked at that café on New Year's Eve, Miyagi came and we went home together. That's why I wanted us to return home together today.

"Why are you trying to be fair about that? It has no meaning."

Miyagi still doesn't turn her head. I speak to her back.

"It does have meaning."

"What kind?"

Miyagi stops and turns around.

"I'm having fun."

Of course, I want Miyagi to enjoy it too. But I know that's a tough ask.

"I'm not having fun."

As expected, Miyagi says something unamusing and turns her back on me again, walking ahead briskly.

"Miyagi, you're walking too fast. Don't speed up on purpose."

"You're just too slow, Sendai-san."

Even though there are quite a few people around, Miyagi's monotone voice comes through clearly. It seems like she's unwilling to slow down. Helpless, I throw my voice to her back.

"Miyagi, your hair is sticking up."

"That's obviously a lie."

Miyagi replies coldly. I want to retort with 'that's mean,' but since it was a lie just to make her turn around, she's not wrong.

"Oh, by the way, the cold brew iced coffee was delicious. Is there a reason you recommended it?"

I ask a silent Miyagi. If left alone, she won't speak at all.

"Why are you asking about it now?"

"I was just curious."

This time, it's not a lie. At the café, I missed the opportunity to ask, but I wanted to know why she recommended the cold brew iced coffee from the many menu options.

"No particular reason."

"So, it was just random?"

"...It seemed like it would suit you, Sendai-san."

"Seemed like it would suit me?"

"Kind of stylish."

Miyagi states a vague reason and continues walking, leaving me behind.

Fast.

Maybe she wants to get home and relax as soon as possible, but she's too fast. Perhaps she really does want to leave me here and go home.

"Miyagi, hold on."

"I'm not waiting."

"Isn't this the kind of time where you walk a bit slower and enjoy chatting?"

"I don't have that kind of habit."

Her reaction seems too cold to me. While I'm not expecting a lively conversation, I'd rather the conversation doesn't end, sinking to the ground.

"Why not create that kind of habit now?"

If we're together, I want to have conversations with Miyagi.

"I'm tired and don't want to talk."

"Then I'll talk by myself, and you can just listen."

With that preamble, I say, "You were cute today, Miyagi. Can I come again?"

"No. Don't come anymore."

"Then, can I come quietly next time?"

"Absolutely not. And stop asking questions."

"Why?"

"Because I'd have to answer."

"Then maybe I should ask more questions."

"You're annoying, Sendai-san. Stay silent until we get home."

With those words, Miyagi takes a big step forward. Her pace quickens significantly.

Even calling her name, she doesn't look back or respond to me.

The station closes in, the ticket gates approach, and we reach the platform. The train arrives, and we step aboard.

Miyagi remains silent. We sway in the silence of the moving train.

"Miyagi."

We could stay silent the whole way, but I call out to Miyagi standing next to me.

No response.

Even though there wasn't a significant sway, I brush my arm against Miyagi's. She furrows her brow and glares at me, then whispers quietly.

"...What were you talking about earlier with Mio-san?"

"At the café?"

Since it's been a while, I confirm.

"Yeah. You two were talking about something, right?"

"We were talking about how cute you are, Miyagi."

"You always say random things like that."

She taps my arm with a light smack. When I said "Ouch" in an exaggerated manner, she responds, "I didn't hit you that hard."

What were Mio and I talking about?

I'm glad she cared even a little about that, but Miyagi mentioning Mio's name doesn't make me happy. Especially because Miyagi seems to be getting along well with Mio.

Mio seems fond of Miyagi.

She frequently invites people to meetups, but nothing unpleasant occurs at those gatherings. Mio doesn't like those kinds of people. So, if Mio is around while Miyagi is working, she can keep unsavory people away from Miyagi.

While that's reassuring, having Mio constantly by Miyagi's side at work isn't appealing.

"——Miyagi, it seems like you've been getting along with Mio, huh?"

I say without looking at her, and she nonchalantly replies, "Just normal." Then adds an undesirable remark.

"...But she's kinder than I thought."

"How so?"

My voice drops lower when I ask.

"Various things. When I took water over to Sendai-san, Noto-san wasn't around."

"What do you mean by not around?"

"Mio-san said Noto-san usually returns to her seat quickly after getting water, so it should be fine. I didn't believe it, but that’s exactly what happened."

"Mio said that, huh?"

"Yeah, she did. She even laughed, saying she told Noto-san to 'not get too close to Shiori-chan.'"

"Huh."

The conversation halts, and silence envelops us. The scenery flows outside the window, the familiar platform comes into view, and we get off the train after a ride that was neither long nor short.

The sidewalk is devoid of Mike-chan.

For whatever reason, the usually social cat rarely appears when Miyagi is around. Though I'd wish for it to show up for Miyagi, who loves animals, it seems unlikely today.

I glance at the black cat walking beside me.

Though she behaves almost like a cat herself, unlike Mike-chan, she only shows her cold side to me.

I understand that's just how she is, but there are times when I wish she could borrow some of Mike-chan's friendliness—like now.

I match my pace with Miyagi and nudge her shoulder.

"Miyagi. ...Is it okay if we hold hands?"

"No."

The unfriendly black cat wouldn’t even let me touch her hand, let alone her belly.

"Then, let me take a picture."

I tug on Miyagi's sleeve. Her walking pace slows and she turns to look at me.

" 'Then' doesn’t make sense here. Where did the idea of a photo even come from?"

Miyagi looks undeniably displeased, her voice low.

Photographs don’t capture souls or anything like that; they simply show Miyagi as she is, without anything ominous. Yet, she has an extreme aversion to being photographed.

"It's a memento of me visiting your workplace. Ideally, I wanted to take a picture of you while you were working, but I figured you'd definitely get angry."

Maybe it'd be kinder not to take pictures at all, but I want to keep a few more memories of her in physical form. I'm trying to be considerate, so I hope she'd at least allow me to take a photo from time to time.

"Of course I'd get angry if you did that."

"That's why I didn't take any while you were working. Can I take one now instead?"

I take my phone out from my bag and show it to her.

"No."

"Come on, it's just for memories."

"I absolutely don't want that kind of memory."

"Then how about just your hand?"

"My hand?"

"Yes, your hand. Stretch your arm out, Miyagi."

I smile warmly at her, but she looks suspicious. She clearly has no intention of extending her arm.

I stop walking and grab her wrist, giving it a little swing.

Our entwined hands swing towards the setting sun. Miyagi's hand and mine are both bathed in the light.

Snap.

My phone, held in one hand, makes a satisfying clicking sound, capturing the day I visited Miyagi's workplace.

"A memory for today. I'll send it to you later, Miyagi."

I release her hand and place my phone back in my bag before she can snatch it away.

"That was sneaky."

Miyagi says, sounding annoyed, and gives my arm a light slap.

"Oh, come on, it's fine."

"It’s not okay. You’re really annoying, Sendai-san."

There’s an audible frustrated sigh as Miyagi steps forward aggressively, marching towards home.

The Miyagi who was beside me is now five or even ten steps ahead. So, I quicken my pace to make sure I keep up and don’t get left behind.

Chapter 119

Things That Suit Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 345

I sit on my bed, staring intently at my hand.

Before I headed to university and now that I'm back, it remains unchanged—my hand, looking the same as always.

Yet the day Sendai-san visited my part-time job, this hand was marked as a "memory," suddenly feeling different than usual.

I clench and unclench my hand.

I look at the photo captured on Sendai-san's phone, also stored on mine. For her, it's a "memory of visiting Miyagi's part-time workplace," and although I said I didn't want the "photo of the day Sendai-san came to my workplace," it was shared with me anyway.

Sighing, I toss the phone onto the bed.

When I give Sendai-san the necklace, will that day become a "memory" too?

The thought of that tightens a knot in my stomach.

To me, the word "memory" still doesn't hold much positive meaning. It inevitably weighs on me. And thinking about choosing and giving the necklace makes me even more depressed.

Choosing, buying, and gifting the necklace is something that will definitely happen in the future. Yet, for me, choosing and giving it feels unbearably difficult.

July is nearing its end, and summer vacation is approaching.

That also means my part-time job is nearing its conclusion.

To be precise, there's just one more shift.
Only one more, and my part-time work will be over.

I need to decide on the necklace for Sendai-san soon.

What should I do?

Back in high school, when I gave her a necklace, the decision of whether to buy it was a dilemma, but I knew which one to choose. Now, though I'm not hesitant about buying, I'm uncertain about which necklace to choose.

Compared to back then, I've changed while still remaining the same.

"Sendai-san would look good in anything, but…"

Anything won't do.
I let out another sigh.

I could ask her directly what kind of necklace she likes, but she seems unlikely to answer if I ask what she "likes." Moreover, I've resolved to decide for myself.

Even so, a part of me thinks it'd be best to reflect Sendai-san's taste somewhat, making choosing a necklace all the more difficult.

"Hmm…"

While there's no rush to decide quickly, this indecision makes it feel like I'll never make up my mind, and I start to panic.

I let out a breath, just as footsteps echo from the shared space—yet there's no knock on my door.

A frown etches onto my forehead.

Ever meticulous, Sendai-san first went to report to the crocodile before coming to my room.
To keep her promise to me.

Today, she was working at her part-time job, leaving me to wait for her return. Though thinking endlessly about the necklace after dinner made time flow somewhat quickly, it wasn't a short amount

of time.

Nonetheless, it seems cruel for her to prioritize reporting to the crocodile over simply saying "I'm home" to me.

I pick up the platypus lying on the floor and place it on my lap. Giving its head a small tap, I say “welcome back,” just in time to hear a knock at the door.

Placing the platypus back on the floor, I stand up.

As I approach the door, I hear a knock followed by, “Miyagi,” calling my name.
Inhaling, then exhaling, I open the door.

“Welcome back.”

I say these words, meant for someone returning, to Sendai-san, who didn’t immediately come to my room.

“I’m home.”
“Sendai-san, have you eaten?”
“I ate before my shift. I made sure to report to the crocodile.”

Sendai-san explains why she first went to her room.

“If you want to talk, why not come in?”

As I turn my back to Sendai-san, I hear the door close. Instead of returning to her own room, she sits beside me. As she attempts to grasp my hand, I push against her shoulder.

I place the platypus between us and give her a stern look.

“The crocodile said it wanted to meet Miyagi.”

Sendai-san speaks, stroking the platypus’s head.

“There’s no way the crocodile would say that.”
“It said it did.”
“Crocodiles don’t talk.”
“This one’s quite chatty.”

“...Sendai-san, you’re not the type to talk to stuffed animals.”

“I do. And not just to the crocodile.”

Sendai-san smiles.
That unnaturally bright expression seems suspicious, making it hard to believe she’s speaking the truth. She’s always like this, easily sidestepping people.

“Lies, all lies.”
“It’s true. I even kissed it.”

With a smile, she kisses the platypus.

“Why are you doing that to the crocodile?”
“To get along better.”

Sendai-san says lightly, like the paper tissues sprouting from the platypus's back, kissing the tissue cover again.

Truly, she’s thoughtless.

Kisses aren’t things you casually give to a platypus, nor should you be giving them to my crocodile.

The one she should be kissing—

I give her shoulder a firm push.

Infuriating.

Sendai-san always does these strange things, making me think unnecessary thoughts.

“Miyagi, instead of pushing, why not pull me closer?”
“There’s no need to pull.”
“I want to get closer to you.”

At this, Sendai-san places the platypus on the bed, closing the distance between us. She holds my hand, and warmth mingles between us. The hand she claimed as a “memory” becomes warm again.

“Are you stupid?”

I complain about her irrationality while my hand instinctively grips

hers, grasping onto her warmth.

Like this, it feels as if our hands being connected is the way it's supposed to be.

“Miyagi. Do you remember us talking about going somewhere during the summer break?”

Sendai-san says abruptly, yet casually like small talk.

“I remember. ...But I’m not going to a hot springs.”
“Where would you like to go, if not to a hot springs?”
“Even if you ask now, I don’t know, and we don’t need to go anywhere.”
“Let’s go somewhere. Your job is ending soon, and you’ll have some free time, right?”
“I do, but…”

I also discussed summer plans with Maika and Asakura-san and plan to go out with them. Even excluding these plans, I have time to spare. But thinking about summer break with Sendai-san is beyond me now.

That’s because I haven’t decided on the necklace yet.

The necklace holds higher priority than planning summer activities with Sendai-san.

“Then, let’s go to the ocean.”

Apparently having a place in mind, Sendai-san suggests, observing my reaction.

“Absolutely not.”
“Then how about a pool?”
“That’s also a no.”
“Where would you go, then?”

With a calm voice, she grips my hand tightly.
It seems she has no intention of giving up on going somewhere, but I can’t concede either.

“I don’t know, but I don’t want to.”

Now isn't the time to plan out the summer holiday.
More importantly, the places she suggested pose their own issues.

Both the beach and pool are crowded and not places where you can comfortably stay fully clothed. Going to such places with Sendai-san doesn't sound fun.

Without a doubt, Sendai-san would be stunning in anything, standing out even in such places.

In moments like these, rather than sharing Sendai-san with the eyes of many people, I want to have her all to myself.

"...What about your plans with Utsunomiya and the others?"

Sendai-san asks in a slightly lower voice, gazing at me intently.

"I have plans."

"And with me?"

Her hand reaches out, brushing against my lips.
Her fingertips press lightly, as if urging me to respond.

Though it's impossible, the spot she touches feels as though it's being scorched by the sun.

"...I want to stay here."

At my softly spoken reply, her fingers retreat.

Going to an aquarium or zoo once in a while might be fine, but I'd rather avoid places where someone might approach Sendai-san.

More than going anywhere, I find comfort in just the two of us being in this space.

This small world, disconnected from university and work, is precious. Though it offers the freedom to go out, it also grants the liberty to choose not to. By choosing not to venture out, I can keep Sendai-san's summer secluded within this world, separated from everything that surrounds her outside.

"Miyagi, don't you want memories of going out together?"

"We don't need to leave to make memories."

"True, but weren't we talking about going somewhere?"

Sendai-san says, sounding a bit discontent.

If we were to go out, a necklace would be necessary for Sendai-san.

I release our connected hands and begin unbuttoning Sendai-san's blouse, one, two, and then three and four more buttons. As her neckline opens, I think about what kind of necklace would suit her.

"Miyagi, what’s this about?"

"I'm looking at Sendai-san."

Trailing my fingers along her neck, I trace the imaginary necklace chain that isn’t there.

"I get that, but—"

I caress her collarbone and gently place my lips a bit higher. As I softly bite down, her body flinches. I pull away, instructing her.

"Stay still."

I press my tongue against the spot where a silver moon once rested during our high school days. Clutching her blouse tightly, I bite gently at her neck, careful not to leave a mark. She calls my name softly at my ear, her whisper tickling me. I suck harder on her skin, leaving a faint red mark.

"Sendai-san, during the summer break—"

As I lift my head, Sendai-san's lips silence my words.
The rest of my sentence vanishes, swallowed by her kiss.

I lightly tap her shoulder in protest, prompting her to break the kiss.

"I didn’t say you could kiss me."

"Well, you didn't say I couldn't, so I did. What were you saying?"

"...Let’s discuss the summer break plans once it's actually summer break."

"Okay."

Easily agreeing, she kisses me again, unreservedly.

Things That Suit Sendai-san (II)

Part 346

I have plenty of free time.

This means the end of work and university exams, heralding the start of summer vacation. At the same time, it means a day without Sendai-san's presence.

Of course, it's not that Sendai-san will be gone forever; she's just about to return.

I flip through a fashion magazine that seems like something Sendai-san might read. I spot clothes that would likely suit her well. Turning another page, I see models wearing outfits that feel distant from my own reality.

It's dull.

Today, Sendai-san went out with Mio-san.

I let out a sigh and glance at my phone on the table.

It's been about forty minutes since receiving a message from Sendai-san that she'd return in about an hour.

Time without any clear plans tends to stretch endlessly.

After having breakfast with Sendai-san this morning, I've spent my day doing nothing. I've eaten lunch and dinner alone, and now I find myself listlessly flipping through magazine pages in the shared space.

Considering how much time I have on my hands, it seems only right for Sendai-san to hurry back. Yet, having urged her to get along with Mio-san, I have no right to send a message saying, "Come home soon."

I continue turning the pages of a magazine I'm not particularly interested in.

I'm not sure if Mio-san would read this magazine, but it's plausible. At the very least, it seems Mio-san would have more in common with Sendai-san than I do.

The distance between Sendai-san and Mio-san doesn't seem too vast nor too close, but surely, Mio-san could bridge any gap if she wished. However, it's not something Sendai-san permits.

I consider Sendai-san admirable for that, and despite having encouraged her to befriend Mio-san, there's a part of me that feels guilty for preferring her to keep some distance.

"Boring."

Recently, a platypus tissue cover that had exchanged hands between me and Sendai-san reverted back to a crocodile, yet Sendai-san herself hasn't returned.

If the crocodile were as chatty as Sendai-san once whimsically suggested, it might have entertained me in my boredom. However, when I spoke to the crocodile earlier, it remained merely a mute tissue cover.

I close the magazine and stand up.

Though I have no specific tasks, I decide to return to my room with the magazine. Just as I get up, not yet an hour later, the door to the shared space swings open, and in walks Sendai-san.

"I'm home," comes her bright voice, to which I respond, "Welcome back." Then I add, "You're late, Sendai-san."

"I returned earlier than I said, didn't I?"
"Well, yes, but..."
"I actually intended to return even earlier, but Mio insisted on hanging out a bit longer," she says, offering a somewhat troubled smile before taking a seat and calling out, "Miyagi." Clearly, it’s an invitation not to retreat to my room, so I reluctantly take a seat myself.

"Was Mio-san doing well?"

I ask, already knowing the answer but bereft of other questions.

"She was bursting with energy, insisting that we hang out again during summer vacation."

Her words make my eyebrows knit together. I gaze steadily at Sendai-san, who sports a cheerful smile.

"You're going out with Mio-san again?"
"I don't have any plans as of now. Should I make some?"

This is not good behavior from Sendai-san.

She's trying to make me decide her plans and her relationship with Mio-san. Sendai-san should choose to befriend Mio-san on her own, deciding for herself whether to meet or not.

While I may or may not be open to plans Sendai-san makes, it's wrong of her to ask me.

So, I respond with another question.

"Do you want to make plans, Sendai-san?"
"If I'm making plans, it'd be with you, Miyagi."
"That's not an answer."

What I asked was whether she intended to plan something with Mio-san, not about plans with me.

"You didn't specify whose plans you were asking about, Miyagi."

True, I didn't explicitly ask, "Do you want to make plans with Mio-san?" But from the context, it should be clear we were talking about her and Mio-san, not about me.

Truly, Sendai-san is sneaky. She avoids giving the right answers even though she knows them.

"By the way, Miyagi, Mio said the mixer was quite a hit."

Sendai-san tries to shift the topic cleverly, though it's not particularly interesting.

"I know. Maika and Mio-san told me."

Just before summer break, Maika attended a mixer that Mio-san had invited her to. It seemed to be an exceptionally good time, as Maika called me that night, dragging me into a rather long conversation with her cheerful voice. I also received a message from Mio-san, reporting back.

"Utsunomiya said it was fun too. Did she mention anything else?"
“She said next time, come along with Sendai-san."
"Do you want to go, Miyagi?"
"Not at all. I’m not good with those things."

Despite an invitation from Mio-san to join next time, I declined.

Even if Maika persists in inviting me again, I'll refuse.

No matter how fun they say it was, I'm not interested.

"I see. I'm not good with them either."

Her voice comes, neither too low nor too high.

When I was working part-time, Mio-san mentioned that no matter how many times she invited, Sendai-san rarely showed up to such gatherings, and even when she did, she’d leave promptly.

Thus, I believe her words that she's not fond of them aren't lies. Yet, knowing she has attended a few of these events before is annoying.

"Sendai-san, an order."

Perhaps unknowingly, my voice is slightly lower. Fixing my gaze on hers, our eyes meet. She's oddly serious, yet remains silent.

"You remember why you're being ordered, right?"

A prompt reply comes to my questioning.

"Of course. On days I go out with Mio, I have to obey Miyagi's wishes, right?"

With that, Sendai-san utters the correct response, continuing, "I'll follow any order, so go ahead."

"Look at this book."

I hand the magazine I was holding over to Sendai-san.

"Did you buy this, Miyagi?"
"Does it matter who bought it?"
"It's not the type of magazine you'd usually read, so I was just curious."

Saying that, Sendai-san places the magazine on the table and flips open the cover. "I've looked at it, but what's next?" she asks.

"Read it and tell me your favorite page."
"Is such a minor order really fine with you?"
"Do you have a complaint?"

If I had to say whether this order is good or bad, then it's bad. But today, I wish to stick with this order.

"It's just... I expected a different kind of order."
"What kind of different order?"
"Let's see, for example—like, 'Lick it,' or something."

Sendai-san utters shameless words in a gentle voice, flashing a smile. Her gaze fixed not on the magazine, but squarely on me.

"Why do you always say such ridiculous things so quickly?"
"Because you seem to like it, Miyagi. So, where would you like me to lick?"

With a smile that never fades, Sendai-san stands up and approaches me.

Her hand clasps my wrist.
She gently pulls me in, and my fingers brush against her lips. Her tongue slides across my fingers, then my knuckles. The warm saliva clings to me, expanding its territory.

"I never said you could lick."

I try to pull back, but she pulls me closer.
The tongue gliding on my skin feels strangely comforting despite its damp unpleasantness.

Her lips press against my palm, the tip of her tongue probing.

If this were a dog's innocent nuzzle, it wouldn't bother me, but what I feel from Sendai-san is nothing of the sort. It's reminiscent of the sensations from past encounters on the bed, dredging up memories better left forgotten.

"Sendai-san, stop it."

I push against Sendai-san's forehead while she's pretending to be a dog.

"Is there somewhere else you'd prefer I lick?"
"I never said that. Don't lick anywhere."
"Then how about touching?"

As she says this, she sharply tugs my wrist.
I'm pulled to my feet and held in her embrace.

"You're annoying."

I stomp on Sendai-san's foot for ignoring my words.
Yet, she refuses to release me.
Her hand slithers under my T-shirt, caressing my side.

"Sendai-san, you're a pervert."

I stomp harder and push on her stomach, creating some space between us.

"Believe it or not, I'm actually holding back."

Her voice doesn't carry the tone of regret.

"Hold back more."
"Then let's create a day when I don't have to hold back, shall we?"
"No way."

My firm words prompt a whisper in my ear from Sendai-san.

"Next time, I want to try something with you, Miyagi."
"...Try what?"
"What you just imagined."
"Sendai-san, you pervert."

I glare at Sendai-san, who says nothing but nonsensical things, and point to the chair she vacated.

"Instead of saying weird stuff, sit there and tell me your favorite page in the magazine."
"Okay, okay."

With a voice full of dissatisfaction, Sendai-san takes a seat.
She then turns a page of the magazine.

I readjust myself in my chair and let out a small sigh.

I'm uncertain if Sendai-san will meet with Mio-san again during summer break, but if there's any chance of it, I must quickly choose a necklace that clearly signifies she belongs to me.

Yet, deciding on a necklace for Sendai-san seems like a task beyond my ability.

I hoped the magazine I bought might offer some insight, but the more I read, the less I understand. Maybe having the wearer herself look through it will yield some helpful information.

"Miyagi, it's hard to read with you staring at me like that."

Sendai-san remarks as she turns another page.

"I'm not really staring."
"Alright then."

Her elegant fingers turn another page.
Before long, half the magazine is read, and then another section.

But whether Sendai-san is truly reading is uncertain.

The pages are flipping at a modest pace.
Before I know it, she reaches the last page and lifts her eyes.

"This one, perhaps."

She directs the open magazine towards me on the table.

"...It's a sunscreen feature."

The page that Sendai-san chose contains nothing but various sunscreens, lacking any accessories, clothing, or models that might serve as a reference for me.

"It’s summer, after all. It piqued my interest."
"...Whatever."

I close the magazine and stand up.

"Did I do something wrong?"
"It’s not that you did anything wrong. But you're annoying."

I step lightly on her foot in front of me.
"Ouch," she exclaims dramatically, and with that, I bite into Sendai-san's ear.

Chapter 120

Miyagi's Name (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 347

Even with the start of summer vacation at university, my daily life doesn't change much.

I still go to my part-time job as usual, and my plans with Miyagi haven't filled up. Aside from the fact that there are no university lectures, my life isn't much different from before summer vacation.

I think that's not a bad thing.

A routine that doesn't change much means a life with Miyagi, which is the summer vacation I wanted.

Even though I want to make plans with Miyagi, she's uncooperative, and nothing gets decided. She often wears a difficult expression, which I'm not entirely satisfied with, but it's not enough to complain about.

On the days I work, I want to be with Miyagi as much as possible, but I don't really want to skip work. Just like before summer vacation, today I'm teaching Kikyo-chan.

"Sensei."

Kikyo-chan, who had been staring intently at her reference book across from me, raises her head and looks at me.

"Is there something you didn't understand?"
"It's not that, but... Sensei, are you going somewhere with Miyagi-san during summer vacation?"
"As of now, there are no plans. Do you have any plans, Kikyo-chan?"
"I have plans to hang out with friends, but it's more like shopping, not really going anywhere."

Her high-school-ish words make me smile as I reply, "I see. Shopping sounds fun."

If I could, I wanted to say I had the same plans as Kikyo-chan. Though I'm supposed to decide summer plans with Miyagi, shopping has already been dismissed, so I can't mention it.

"—Sensei."

Kikyo-chan speaks with an unusually earnest voice, prompting me to shift my gaze to her reference book in anticipation for a question. However, no question comes despite the wait.

"Kikyo-chan?"
"Um... if you have some free time, I was wondering if I could hang out..."

Straightening her posture as if it were important, her words trail off there, and when the continuation doesn't come, I finish it for her.

"You mean, hang out with me?"
"Yes."

Kikyo-chan says clearly.

This is problematic.

The first words that come to mind should not be conveyed to her, so I pull a nonconfrontational "reason to decline" from my mind and voice it.

"Actually, university students are quite busy even during summer vacation. I'm sorry."
"It's okay. I'm the one who asked something weird, sorry."

With a bright voice, the exceptional student responds to her evasive teacher, keeping the air undisturbed as she returns her attention to the reference book.

"I'm the one who's sorry."

Kikyo-chan is a precious student to me, but not someone I would go out with during summer vacation. Other than my part-time job, I wish to dedicate my entire summer vacation to Miyagi.

Miyagi has told me to go out with Mio, so I've already spent part of my summer vacation with her.

Though we hadn't made any future plans, spending a day with Mio during summer put her in high spirits, talking excitedly about pools, the sea, and mixers. Her high-energy messages continue even now.

I suspect there will be a time we meet up again, but Mio has a tendency to try and invite more people if given the chance, so I must firmly remind her to include just the two of us.

Sighing inwardly, I glance at the pencil case on the table.

It was a gift from me to Kikyo-chan when she passed her high school entrance exam, still spotless.
The pencil case I received from Miyagi for Christmas is also without a single blemish.

Kikyo-chan likely cherishes her pencil case the same way as I do mine.

The common point is—.

No, what I need to focus on right now is her studying.
I turn to Kikyo-chan.

As questions arise from her, I resolve them and convey the key points of the answers. Engaging in such activities, time flies by.

Compared to other jobs, tutoring takes less time.

Kikyo-chan closes her reference book, and I begin packing up to leave.
I exit her room and head to the entrance.
As I put on my shoes to leave, Kikyo-chan follows me.

"Thank you, Sensei."

She bows her head slightly in front of the entrance door, and I wave back with a "See you next week."

Though I walk slowly while being watched by Kikyo-chan, once out of her sight, my pace quickens.

I always hurry when returning home.

The route is set, with no detours.
I head straight to the train station, take the train, and arrive home.
Though it's not close, I'm back home in no time.

Entering, I remove my shoes and head to the shared space.
Miyagi isn't there, but she soon peeks out of her room and says "Welcome back."

"I'm home. What were you doing?"

I ask Miyagi, who remains in her room rather than coming out.

"Nothing in particular. Sendai-san, are you hungry?"

Indifferently, she asks.

"Not really," I reply.

During summer vacation, we have early dinners before I leave for work.

"Then, go to your room. I'll come too."
"You're coming to my room?"
"What else would it be? Hurry up and go to your room already."

Miyagi says with an annoyed expression.
It's not unusual for her to visit my room, but this manner of speaking is rare.

I closely observe Miyagi's face.
Her lips are adorned with a hint of gloss, something absent before my shift. It's a lip balm I picked for her.

It's unusual, but I can't fathom why Miyagi is behaving unusually. If it means what I mentioned before, "It's my turn to do something for Miyagi," will come true, I'd be delighted, but that's unlikely.

However, there's a reason, and before I can ask, she presses, "Hurry up." Regardless of her reason, having her visit my room is pleasing, so I obediently return to my room. Almost immediately, Miyagi follows and directs me to sit down.

In front of the bed, as instructed, I sit down, and Miyagi sits beside me, saying with a sullen expression,

"First, no comments on this."
"Comments on what?"
"Here."

Ignoring my question, Miyagi places a small, mint-green wrapped box on the floor with a low voice.

I don't get it.
Why is there a small box?
Why is it being given to me?
I don't understand, yet memories from my high school days flash back.

The fall of my senior year in high school.
Miyagi gave me a similar small box.

Back then, inside that box was—.

"Didn't you hear me, Sendai-san? I said that's for you."

Miyagi says with a grimace, as if she'd bitten into a thousand bitter insects.

"For me, why?"

My heart thumps loudly.

"Just open it already."

Compelled by her displeased voice, I reach for the small box.
I carefully unwrap the mint-green paper and scrutinize the small box.

What could fit inside.
There's only so much it could be.

Slowly opening the box, something rather reminiscent from the past comes into view, causing me to hold my breath.

This is—.

"…A leaf pendant?"

The pendant, while silver like the one I received in high school, is clearly different from the previous one.

Instead of a moon, it's four leaves.
To be precise, the pendant's motif is a four-leaf clover.

"It's a necklace, not a pendant," Miyagi corrects me pointedly. So I pick up the necklace, not a pendant.

"Is this... perhaps a birthday present?"

My birthday is August 23rd. Being only the middle of August, it seems too early for a present, but if that's the reason for the sudden appearance of the necklace, it makes sense.

However, Miyagi speaks in a low voice, deep wrinkles forming on her brow.

"No, it's not. Did you forget, Sendai-san? You asked me to pick a necklace for you."

"You remembered?"

I certainly did say that. When I wore the necklace Miyagi gave me in high school, she told me to choose something more fashionable. I replied, "You should choose, Miyagi."

That conversation happened on the day we visited the aquarium. Quite some time has passed, so I thought Miyagi had forgotten about picking a necklace.

"Did you want me to forget?"

I hear her low voice, prompting me to add the missing words.

"Not at all. Miyagi, you just never mentioned the necklace, so I thought you weren't going to choose one for me."

"If you don't want it, give it back."
"I do want it. Thank you."

Who would've thought that Miyagi would really pick one for me?

It's unexpected. She hadn't mentioned it, so I figured I'd have to one day insist we go look at necklaces together.

It's a necklace Miyagi chose after I asked her to, a symbol indicating that I'm hers. A necklace for me, to make it clear I'm Miyagi's.

Such things aren't given as birthday presents but on an ordinary day.

It's so like Miyagi, making me feel more like I belong to her.

"Can I wear it now?"

When I ask Miyagi, she says, "Hand it over."

"You're not asking for it back, are you?"
"I'm going to put it on for you, so turn around."

"Eh?"

I must have misheard. When Miyagi, back in high school, gave me the necklace, she told me to put it on myself. There's no way she'd say she would put it on me now.

I find myself staring at Miyagi, who repeats, "Hand it over."

"Eh?"

Repeating the same word like a fool, the necklace leaves my hands and goes to hers. She pushes my shoulders slightly, and I slowly turn my back. Her hands touch my hair as she places the necklace on me.

With a fingertip, I touch the four-leaf clover pendant resting on my chest. The chain is shorter than the one I received back then so that the silver charm stands out more visibly.

"...Thank you."

I mutter softly, and she grabs my clothes.
Tightly, firmly.
Then something presses against my back.

This must be Miyagi's forehead, accompanied by a small voice.

"This necklace is a new sign that you're mine alone, so wear it always. When you meet Mio-san or anyone else, wherever, whenever, always wear it."

"Alright. I'll show it to everyone."

"That's not what I meant. Also, the reason I was working part-time was to buy this, so I won't be working anymore."

"...Eh?"

My unexpectedly loud voice surprises me, but Miyagi doesn't react. She remains silent, holding onto my clothes firmly.

"You were working just to buy this necklace?"

Even as I question her, there's no response. Calling out to her, I feel her forehead press harder, and a small voice surfaces.

"...Because you're mine alone, it wouldn't make sense to buy it with anyone else's money."

If I listed Miyagi's dislikes, part-time work would undoubtedly be on that list. She'd never do something she dislikes for me, so I never imagined she'd work to buy the necklace. The thought alone was unimaginable.

It feels like a lie.
Not only did Miyagi choose a necklace for me, but she was willing to work for it.

What should I do?
I'm so happy.
Happy isn't strong enough a word for how I feel.

"Sendai-san, you still have the necklace I gave you before, right?"
"Yes."
"Bring it."

Her forehead moves away, and releasing the grip on my clothes, she steps back.

When I turn around and ask "Why?" her response is simply, "Just bring it."

I stand, fetching the necklace with the silver moon pendant and sit back down next to her.

"I brought it, but..."

As I state this, she looks right at me and says,

"I'm keeping this, so give it back."
"What? No."

This is a precious memory, creating a future where Miyagi and I became roommates on graduation day.

The connection it forged between my high school and university selves is something I cherish too much to hand over, not even to Miyagi. I wish to keep it with me, always.

"Sendai-san."

She stretches her hand out, demanding with a strong voice, "Give it back."

No.

I nearly say it but swallow the word, reluctantly placing the moon-adorned necklace in her palm.

"Hazuki."

Softly, she calls my name. Her tone, different from usual, makes my ears prick, all my nerves focusing on her.

Miyagi opens her mouth, her voice firm but not harsh, though not gentle either.

"The leaf(葉) I just gave you and the moon(月) from before make Hazuki(葉月), your name. This means your name is made up of things I gave you, and you can't belong to anyone else. You belong to me, name and all, so I'm taking this moon necklace."

She closes her fist around the moon and touches my necklace with

her other hand.
She traces the chain and strokes the four-leaf clover.

"Hazuki."

Speaking my name distinctly, she reaches to touch my cheek.

"…Why are you crying?"

Miyagi whispers gently.

Miyagi's Name (II)

Part 348

I'm not crying.

As I intend to say this, I find myself realizing something—Miyagi's figure appears blurred before me. Her voice is crystal clear, but her outline hazes out, becoming indistinct and vague.

I understand now. Miyagi is right. That's why my vision is unclear and indistinct, making it difficult to see her well.

Feelings of joy, surprise, and happiness…

These rising emotions threaten to wash away the image of Miyagi, and my cheeks are warm as I feel her gentle touch. I grasp her hand, which is now wet with my tears.

"...Shiori."

When I finally speak the name I've wanted to say for so long, my heart races and my chest feels light and fluffy.

The world is unkind and cold, and things never turn out as I'd like.

I couldn't fulfill my parents' expectations, nor could I become like my sister. Even though I was uncertain if what was expected of me was who I wanted to become, there was no doubt it was who I had to become, and though I tried, my desires never came true.

The unfulfilled desires changed my family, making my words unable to reach them.

A home without voices that answer back.
A place I couldn't eagerly return to.

And yet, I continued to go back to such a home, saying "I'm home" every day, repeating the monotonous days until graduation, awaiting the day I would leave.

That was who I was. But then, Miyagi appeared.

Miyagi, who was as reckless as a stray cat, is still as unpredictable and cat-like as ever, but she created a place for me to return to, something that my family had given up on.

"Shiori."

When I call Miyagi's name once more, she wipes my tears away with her hand, then pulls a couple of tissues from the back of the platypus plush and hands them to me.

"Don't cry anymore."

An indistinct Miyagi speaks with a troubled look.

"Call me Hazuki again."

Letting the tissues drop to the floor without wiping my tears, I look at the still-blurred Miyagi.

"...Hazuki."

Quietly, softly.
Miyagi calls my name.

Hazuki.

Born in August. Until now, that was the only significance my name held.

But today, Miyagi made what was just a simple name special.

Miyagi always allows me to become a new version of myself.
She reshapes my past, and changes my future.

I touch Miyagi's hand that holds the moon pendant.
Inside, there's half of me.
The other half, given by Miyagi, resides on my heart.

"Shiori."

I say softly.

Hazuki becomes a complete name only when the leaf and the moon are together.

It won't do if only the leaf is with me. I can't be me without Miyagi. I can't live with the part of the moon missing.

That's why Miyagi must always be with me.

I breathe in slowly.
I know the words to take the first step toward making this wish come true.

"I want to tell Shiori something—"

I finally get to convey the words I've wanted to say, but Miyagi covers my mouth with her hand.

"I told you at the beginning, no comments."

She presses her palm firmly against my lips.

While I'm grateful she's holding half of my name, I wish she wouldn't use her other hand like this.
As a result, I can't say that it's a misunderstanding.

Of course, I wanted to tell her the significance of the pendant, but more than that, I wanted to express my feelings first.

"We're done talking about the necklace now. Don't call me Shiori anymore."

I want to say "Eh?" but trapped by her hand, I can't utter even short words.

Miyagi is really awful.
Not only does she not give me a chance to speak, but she even takes away my chance to call her "Shiori."

I grab Miyagi's wrist and peel away the hand covering my mouth. Gaining back my ability to speak more readily than expected, I take a gentle breath as Miyagi, sounding displeased, says:

"Sendai-san, it's fine if you don't talk."

Her low voice echoes across the room.
When I look at Miyagi, I see a frown etched deeply between her brows.

The atmosphere to convey "I love you" has dissipated, and Miyagi seems aloof. In such situations, it's not time for love confessions, so I raise a question instead.

"I understand I shouldn't call you Shiori, but is it okay if you call me Hazuki?"
"I won't call you that anymore."

Just as I thought.

This is the kind of person Miyagi is.
She raises expectations but doesn't fulfill them.

Yet, I'm accustomed to her being this way, and it's exactly why I fell for her.

"My name belongs to Miyagi, so do as you like. ...Though I'd be happy if you called me that."

When I add my hope, Miyagi pulls another two tissues from the platypus's back and offers them to me. This time, I obediently use them to wipe away the tears that are drying up.

"...It's not like I'll never call you that again."

Miyagi mumbles quietly.

"Does that mean you'll call me that on special occasions?"

I inquire, but there’s no response.
Avoiding my gaze, she fixes her eyes on the platypus.

"So, will you say my name when it matters?"

I ask once more, prompting Miyagi to reply without taking her eyes off the platypus.

"...I'll call you when I feel like verifying something, and when I do, Sendai-san can call me Shiori too."

Miyagi's words bring memories rushing back.
When I wore the moon pendant, Miyagi often checked its presence. Even when I stopped wearing it, she kept wanting to confirm I was hers.

I touch the four-leaf clover she gave me.

"Miyagi, you should verify it every day."
"No way."

A small but firm voice returns my suggestion.

I'm dissatisfied, but I know I should accept it.

Being called Hazuki, or calling her Shiori, there will surely be occasions, even if infrequent.

With my hand still clutching the four-leaf clover, I touch her hand holding the moon.

"Will you wear this, Miyagi?"
"I won't wear it. I'll keep it."
"I see. Then, can I gift you a new necklace for your birthday?"
"No."
"You're so stingy, Miyagi."
"...it's fine if I'm stingy, but for my birthday, pick something other than a necklace, Sendai-san."

It seems she doesn't want a necklace, but she does want something chosen by me. It's quite a progression compared to last year when she didn't even voice wanting a birthday gift.

"Miyagi, you know..."

"What?"

"You really are cute."

The way she indirectly communicates her desire for something makes her undeniably Miyagi-like and impossible not to love even more.

I draw Miyagi's hand towards me and place a kiss on the hand that holds the moon.

"Sendai-san, don't do weird things."
"Okay, okay."

I respond cheerfully and catch Miyagi’s arm as she tries to pull away.

"For Miyagi's birthday, I'll get a delicious round cake, so let's eat it together."

I hold her tight.
I hug Miyagi with all my strength.

Chapter 121

Plans with Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 349

8:36 AM.

Considering that I slept without setting an alarm, I think I managed to wake up pretty early. Yet, I don't feel like getting out of bed. If possible, I'd like to spend the entire day just lounging here.

That's precisely what summer break is all about.

There's no need to wake up exceptionally early, nor is there a need to fill the schedule to be busy. A bit of idleness, lazily rolling about, seems just right.

However, Sendai-san is different.
She tends to wake up reasonably early and seems eager to do something.

Today is no exception.
She seems to be in the shared space instead of the adjacent room, as I can hear some noises. If I confine myself to my room past 9 o'clock, there will undoubtedly be a knock on the door urging me to come and have breakfast.

I sit up and unclasp the hand that's been holding a specific object.

I hadn't intended to sleep with it, but I found that I had inadvertently dozed off clutching it, and it remained in my hand till morning.

Part of Sendai-san's name.
Hazuki's "月" (moon).

The silver moon in my palm was something I claimed as mine, in exchange for the necklace I hesitantly decided on after much

deliberation.

I clench and then release my fist.

I can recall the day I went to buy this necklace as if it were just yesterday. My high school self was endlessly torn about whether to buy it, searched for a reason to make the purchase, and walked through the dimly lit streets to the shopping mall to obtain it.

I grab the black cat lying next to my pillow and place the necklace around its neck, wrapping the chain around twice.

This moon may be mine alone, but since it once bound Sendai-san, it doesn't suit me to wear it.

Yet, hiding it away somewhere doesn't seem right either.
I want to keep it where I can see it.

Thus, the only one who can wear the moon around its neck is the black cat, which Sendai-san brought to me, making it mine. The shiny black fur suits the silver moon well.

"...Roro-chan"

I try voicing the name Sendai-san gave it.
The black cat doesn't meow, but it looks somewhat satisfied.
I stroke the small stuffed head, then the necklace.

The moon illuminates the dark night.

I, who used to fear the darkness of an empty house, stopped worrying about darkness after I began living with Sendai-san. A home where someone is present brings no fear of anything unseen.

Surely, wherever it shines, the silver moon will illuminate the dark night and obliterate the darkness that comes with terror.

"Don't lose it, okay?"

I address these words to the black cat before getting out of bed.

I place the black cat on the bookshelf and, still in my sweatshirt-as-pajamas, head to the shared space. I greet Sendai-san, who is preparing breakfast, with a "Good morning," and she returns the

greeting with a "Good morning."

I gaze intently at Sendai-san.

A four-leaf clover.
My leaf.

It decorates her chest visibly.
I step closer to Sendai-san and gently touch the necklace.

It's neither cold nor warm.
Yet, somehow, I feel Sendai-san's body heat.

"I'll get ready and help."

After stroking the clover, I say this, and Sendai-san responds in a soft voice.

"It's okay, take your time."
"I'll be right back."

I head to the washroom to brush my teeth and wash my face.
Gazing at myself in the mirror, I exhale deeply.

"What should I do next?"

Though buying the necklace through work was a significant goal, which I was able to accomplish, there's still something else I must do.

August 23.

It's not immediate, but if I dawdle, Sendai-san's birthday will arrive in a flash.

I haven't decided on a gift to present on that day yet.

Not giving anything is not an option, so I feel a strong need to decide on something. However, having already given her a necklace and wanting her not to change the earrings she's currently wearing, it complicates matters.

Asking her what she wants directly and gifting that would typically work, but I doubt she'd tell me what she truly desires.

Most likely, Sendai-san would say that anything I choose would be fine, and if pressed further, she'd probably suggest something safe and unspecific.

So, I need to decide the present on my own, but I always struggle to figure out what to give Sendai-san.

Gifts, unlike quizzes or problem sets, are truly a hassle without a definitive right answer.

I press my index finger between my eyebrows.
Smoothing out the wrinkles in the mirror reflection, I return to the shared space.

"Sendai-san, I'll go change, wait for me."

I call out, and Sendai-san smiles as she replies.

"The bread's almost done, so why not just sit down as you are?"

As she places the orange juice on the table set with ham, sunny-side-up eggs, and salad, and pulls out my chair, returning to my room becomes no longer an option. I respond, "I'll handle the cleanup," and sit down.

"Alright, I'll take you up on that."

With Sendai-san's voice, the bread is done toasting. Placing it on a plate, she sets it on the table before seating herself, and as usual, our voices overlap in saying, "Let's eat." I spread jam and butter on the toast and take a bite.

"Hey, Miyagi."

At Sendai-san's voice, I swallow the toast in my mouth before opening it to respond.

"What is it?"
"Our summer break plans, what do you want to do? I'd like to decide soon."

Sending a smile my way, Sendai-san takes a bite of toast smeared with jam and butter.

"I said I want to stay here."
"That's true, but I'd like some plans beyond just staying here."
"...What kind of plans?"

Faced with the question whose answer I've put off for too long, my gaze falls upon a chopstick rest shaped like a calico cat. Picking up my chopsticks and popping the ham into my mouth, I hear Sendai-san's cheerful voice.

"Is there anywhere you want to go, Miyagi? The sea, the pool, hot springs, anywhere you'd like."
"You know, I already said no to all of those."
"I remember, but I had to mention them too. If all the places I want to go are no good, then Miyagi, you should decide the destination."
"But there's nowhere I particularly want to go."
"If you have nowhere in mind, can I decide then?"

No way is that a good idea.
Choosing destinations with places like the sea, pools, or hot springs with potentially high exposure levels would not end well.

Yet, when asked to decide where to go, nothing comes to mind. If I were going out with Maika, I could list several places I want to visit, but when it comes to Sendai-san, my mind stalls.

That's probably because I can anticipate that even if it's a place she doesn't particularly want to go to, she would accompany me if I asked, prioritizing me too much.

"...I'll consider anything other than the sea, pool, and hot springs."

Even if I understand why my brain isn't working, I don't know how to make it work. So, I end up leaving my summer vacation plans entirely to Sendai-san.

"How about a festival?"

An unexpected suggestion comes, prompting a frown to form in my brow.

"What would we do there?"
"Well, at a festival, you'd eat something from the stalls, or watch the mikoshi parade, right?"

"No way."
"Why not? It sounds fun."
"It's too crowded."

The food from stalls is something I can get elsewhere, and the mikoshi doesn't particularly interest me. I don't see the point in diving into a crowd just to eat or see those things.

Besides, Sendai-san would likely stand out in such a place, and I'm sure I wouldn't enjoy myself going there with her.

"It might be crowded, but it could be fun once we're there."
"It's a hassle."

I take a bite of toast, enjoying the balanced sweetness and saltiness as I chew. Across from me, Sendai-san pops the egg white of her sunny-side-up egg into her mouth.

The calico cat and black cat chopstick rests on the table seem to watch over us as we eat, and the quiet breakfast continues until the toast and eggs gradually disappear.

Sendai-san picks up the last piece of ham with her chopsticks, bringing it to her mouth.
I take a gulp of orange juice. As my glass drops halfway, Sendai-san asks with an unusually serious face.

"Have you never been to a festival, Miyagi?"
"I have."

I reply, nibbling on a cherry tomato from my salad.
Sendai-san stares at me and adds in a voice neither too small nor too loud, "…With Utsunomiya?"

"Yes."
"I see."

Her unnecessarily bright voice rings out in the shared space as she gives me a cheerful smile and continues.

"Why don't we decide where to go with rock-paper-scissors? If I win, we go to the festival. If you win, no plans for the summer break."
"You'd cheat, so no."
"You're so stingy, Miyagi. I wanted to go to a festival together."

Though she says it sounding quite disappointed, she doesn't deny the possibility of cheating. That means rock-paper-scissors would certainly have led to the festival, so I kick Sendai-san's leg under the table.

"Ouch."

She grimaces, speaking dramatically.

"I didn't kick you that hard."
"Miyagi, what about wearing yukata instead of going to a festival?"

My words are ignored, and a new suggestion flies my way from Sendai-san.

"I don't have a yukata."
"It doesn't matter. We could buy or rent one."
"Neither, thank you."

It seems wasteful to buy something I might not even wear, and if I do, it'd likely be only once. Moreover, wearing a yukata isn't worth the trouble of renting one.

"Alright, but if we're not doing rock-paper-scissors, you can't dismiss having summer break plans."

I want to get rid of having plans.
If I insist strongly, I think she'd relent.

I'm sure that whether we play rock-paper-scissors or not, I'd get my way. But I think it's not right if it leaves her desires unseen.

"…Sendai-san."

I look at the clover adorning her chest.
The sign that she's mine alone is visible to everyone. Even at a festival, it would be there to see.

"Have you decided where you want to go?"

She asks softly.

"…Does a birthday present have to be a thing?"

"It doesn't have to be, and it doesn't have to be anything at all."

She gently smiles and touches the clover on her chest.

"Let's make the summer break plan a festival, then."

Just one day during a long summer vacation.
If that's all, I think it's okay to listen to what Sendai-san, who belongs to me alone, wants.

"…Does that mean going to a festival is my birthday present?"
"If you want something else, I can pick a different thing."
"The festival is fine. But if we're going, we should both wear yukata."
"That's not included in the birthday present."
"Come on."
"No way."

I kick Sendai-san harder than before.

Plans with Sendai-san (II)

Part 350

"Ah."

Sendai-san came to a sudden stop in front of the bookshelf. Then she murmured "Roro-chan" while gently stroking the head of the black cat plush.

She had been in a good mood since she arrived at my room after lunch, claiming she had some business to take care of. Now, her mood seemed even lighter.

"Sendai-san, is something wrong with the stuffed toy?"

"Not at all. It's just adorable," she replied, lifting the black cat and giving it a small kiss on the nose.

Her fingertips brushed against the necklace hanging from the cat's neck, trailing the chain as she caressed the moon pendant. The cat remained silent. I merely watched from where I sat on the bed, refraining from speaking. Her fingers continued to trace over the plush cat's tiny paw, giving it a gentle shake.

I anticipated that Sendai-san would notice the cat's accessory.

Yet, I hadn't expected her to look so delighted over it. She gazed at the black cat like it was a cherished treasure and spoke to it.

"It suits you."

A tender voice directed at the stuffed animal reached my ears.

I couldn't fathom what the cat might be thinking.

Perhaps it was enjoying being touched by Sendai-san, or perhaps it wasn't. Wearing Hazuki's moon, the black cat kept an expressionless face as it endured her touch and was set back on the shelf.

"Sendai-san, you really like cats, don't you?"

"Well, yeah," she said with a chuckle, turning to the black cat again and smiling. "Take care, Roro-chan."

"...Hazuki."

I called out to Sendai-san. Though my voice was barely above a whisper, she quickly took a seat beside me.

"Shio—"

I silenced her by gently nudging her with my foot and reaching towards her chest.

I didn't kiss her on the nose, but like she had with the black cat, I touched her necklace. Following the chain, I traced over the four-leaf clover pendant. She said nothing, and I lightly pressed my lips to the clover, avoiding her hand.

Her fingers combed through my hair as she softly called my name, "Miyagi." Something warm pressed briefly against the crown of my head, then released. When I looked up, Sendai-san brushed a kiss against my cheek.

"Let go," I said, gently pushing against her shoulder. Her lips left, but her fingertips traced over my lips. I swatted her hand away, and with a longing touch, her fingers brushed over the plumeria earring before resting on my lap.

"Miyagi, how about we have dinner outside today?" Sendai-san nudged me playfully with her shoulder.

"No."

"Why not? We never go out for meals together."

"The festival is coming up."

"The festival is still a ways off. C'mon, let's step out for a bit."

"It's hot, and I don't want to."

With a light nudge from my leg, I moved the hand on my knee to rest on the bed. Sendai-san frowned and grumbled "stingy" under

her breath before adding, "Oh, how about we go look at yukatas together sometime soon?"

"Sendai-san, I don't wear yukatas."

"There's no harm in just looking."

"No."

"Then, lend me the tablet for a bit. There's something I want to see."

"What do you want to look at?"

"Just hand it over for now," she said with a smile, and though I hesitated, I brought her the tablet. Hiding the screen from me, she then displayed something and asked, "Is there anything you'd like?"

White and blue. Peach, purple, yellow. The screen displayed an array of colorful flowers.

More precisely, they bloomed across yukatas in cool shades.

"No. Aren't they all basically the same?"

"Not at all. The flowers and designs are all different."

"True, but I'm not interested."

I understood that the yukatas on display were different—morning glories, sunflowers, and ones with flowers even I could recognize were there. But when asked if there's a yukata I'd want to wear, they all seemed the same to me.

I've never been one for these things, and they don’t suit me.

Perhaps because of these feelings, when I consider wearing them, the differences between the yukatas become indistinguishable, like looking at chocolate bars with their wrappers removed.

"If you’re not into flowers, there are fireworks or goldfish designs too. Want to see?"

"Sendai-san, look at them on your own."

"These kinds of things are more fun together. I promise I won't force you into one. Just indulge me a little, call it a birthday present option."

"...If it's just looking, then it's okay."

I wasn’t planning on adding options to her gift, but I didn’t want to completely shut her down either. Summer vacation still stretched on with plenty of time, so a bit of compromise wouldn’t hurt.

I took hold of one side of the tablet. Sendai-san brought up various yukata designs on the screen, commenting along the way.

"This color is nice. The flowers are cute. The obi design is intricate."

With each of her thoughts, more yukatas appeared, passing by my eyes. Every now and then, one that would suit Sendai-san perfectly popped up, making me almost speak out. Glancing at her, I saw her enjoying the yukatas without looking my way.

It's slightly annoying, but seeing her take an interest in something is also enjoyable.

"Miyagi, this one would look good on you," she pointed to a yukata.

"Why don’t you wear it, Sendai-san," I calmly replied, flipping the page. She frowned, asking if I didn't find it cute.

"...It is cute."

Precisely because it's cute, I don't want to wear it.

"Regardless of wearing it or not, which one does Miyagi like?"

"I never think about wanting to wear a yukata."

I don’t dislike them. However, I can't put one on by myself, and they seem cumbersome.

Wearing something I can't put on alone and going somewhere feels unsettling. If it got disheveled from moving around, it’d be a hassle.

"I see," she responded, her voice neither bright nor dark, fixing her gaze on me. Lowering her eyes to the floor, she gave the bed a pat

before looking back at me and hesitantly opening her mouth to speak.

"Um, Miyagi... Is it okay to ask about looking through your old album?"

"...Why do you want to see the album?"

"I'd like to see Miyagi in a yukata."

The album doesn't contain the current me, but the past me resides there along with my mother, which makes me reluctant to open it.

"The album isn't easily accessible."

"I see."

"Did you wear a yukata as a child, Sendai-san?"

With a deliberately neutral tone, I asked.

"I did."

"What kind?"

"...The same as my sister's. Back when we got along."

She replied, a hint of a smaller voice.

I realized I had asked something I shouldn't have.

That's what I thought, but Sendai-san forced a smile as if to dispel that thought. Then, in an unusually bright voice, she continued speaking.

"When I was a kid, I wore matching outfits with my sister and we did everything together. But as we grew older, we stopped being able to do the same things, including wearing matching clothes."

With a sigh, Sendai-san exhaled. I gave the floor a soft kick, directing my gaze to the tips of my feet.

"...You don't have to say anything you don't want to."

As much as I want to know more about Sendai-san, I'm not about to force her to disclose what she wishes to keep to herself.

Everyone has things they'd rather not say or want kept hidden.

There are things one wishes to keep tucked safely in the depths of their heart, and exposing them is like tearing at the tender parts of the soul, causing pain.

No matter how much I want to know about Sendai-san, I don't want to go about it that way.

"Don't worry. I shared it because I wanted you to know," came a gentle voice that drew my eyes upward. I met Sendai-san's gaze. She smiled warmly and reached for my hair.

"Miyagi, can I braid this part of your hair?"

Before I could give my consent, the hair hiding my ear was gently pulled and woven into a braid.

"I didn't say you could."

"Oh, come on. It'll look cute with a braid here. Shall I tie a ribbon for you as well?"

"There's no need for a braid or a ribbon. Why do you want to braid my hair all of a sudden?"

"An early celebration for my birthday."

She said it so cheerfully that I couldn't bring myself to stop her. Consequently, my hair was styled into a braid, secured with a hair tie she used for her own hair.

"Sendai-san, when are we going to the festival?"

I snatched the finished braid from Sendai-san, who was about to put a ribbon on it, and asked her a question.

"It'll probably be after my birthday. This year, even after my birthday passes, there's still something fun to look forward to, so it feels like a bonus."

"How do you know it'll be fun?"

"It definitely will be. Thank you, Miyagi."

"I haven't done anything yet."

"I'm happy even if you haven't done anything."

With that, Sendai-san began crafting another braid.

Plans with Sendai-san (III)

Part 351

A birthday is a day that is marked, a date etched into memory, even if it isn't circled on a calendar.

For me, such days have always been days best avoided.

Of course, I still send gifts to my friends on their birthdays and occasionally receive presents myself. Nonetheless, I would refrain from extravagant celebrations.

I've always been that kind of person, but since becoming a university student, I can no longer be that way.

With a sigh, I exhale.

Days swiftly pass, and before I knew it, the Bon Festival had concluded, bringing us to Sendai-san's birthday. I'm now locked in a staring contest with the round cake behind the showcase.

I'm the only one celebrating the birthday.
And of course, the birthday star is just one person, too.

With no one else joining us to eat, a round cake feels excessive. Yet, Sendai-san insists on preferring a round cake.

"Hmm…"

I never liked the round birthday cakes my father bought. Always too occupied with work to join me, he left me with ornate, beautiful cakes too much for one person. Storing the remaining cake in the fridge only amplified the loneliness of being home alone.

Now, with Sendai-san, there's no more leftover cake.

I understand that well.
Sendai-san has turned round cakes into good memories.

Although she assures me that no cake will remain today, my anxiety

prompts me to consider switching to sliced cakes.

There’s no one to consult.

It’s midway between noon and evening, a lull in the store's traffic. With Sendai-san left at home after claiming she wanted to come along, I can ponder at my leisure.

The trade-off was losing control over my appearance.

When I informed Sendai-san of my intention to shop for the cake alone, she transformed me into a doll—braiding my hair, applying makeup, and dressing me.

Practically an image overhaul, she insisted on it, arguing that someone staying behind deserved nothing less. Reluctantly, I went along with it.

I tug on one of the braids near my ear.

Wearing a skirt reflecting the freshness of the summer sky, and holding a bag I’ve never seen Sendai-san use.

Everything’s unbearably cute.
I don’t think it suits me.

I glare at my reflection in the showcase’s glass.
But, no matter how much I wish it, my hairstyle, my face, and my clothes remain unchanged. My brow furrows deeper, just as when I left the house.

As I stand here, I find myself concerned less with the cake than with my appearance.

Making it here alone, today’s purchase is a cake for a birthday—a once-a-year occasion. Such cakes should be chosen by someone else, not by the birthday person, hence my solo trip.

I tear my gaze from the case, focusing on the floor.

Counting one, two, three, to calm myself before returning to the cakes.

A white cake for a birthday is ideal.

With strawberries and enticing-looking whipped cream.

The shape won't affect the taste, so whether it's an isosceles triangle or a circle, it's fine.

I take a deep breath in, then out.
Standing firm, I address the attendant behind the showcase.

"I'll take the smallest whole cake, please."

Today's star is indeed Sendai-san.
I accompany the round cake with a "Happy Birthday" plaque and candles, heading home.

Walking along the sidewalk under the blazing sun makes me quicken my pace due to the cake.

Celebrating Sendai-san's birthday last year has set a precedent, ensuring that we celebrate it every year. There's no escaping the accumulation of memories.

Times have changed. Just as Sendai-san transitioned from a roommate to someone living in something important, I have changed, too. I may not know what awaits me at the end of this growing collection of memories, but there's no discarding them now.

Earrings Sendai-san attached to my ears.
A necklace around a black cat's neck.
A crocodile tissue cover—reminders of time spent with Sendai-san.

My space is overflowing with things that remind me of Sendai-san. Memories aren't something I can discard at will, just as the visible items are also beyond my disposal.

I feel like my baggage has increased quite a bit.

Thinking about the weight of my baggage that will soon increase again makes my legs freeze, but I can't imagine losing it.

I tug on the braids that Sendai had made.
My hurrying steps speed up even more.

Cleaving through the muggy air, fleeing the sun, a familiar building

appears, prompting me up the stairs to the third floor, where I open the front door.

“I'm home,” I softly announce, closing the door and removing my shoes.

In the shared space, Sendai-san awaits, receiving my greeting with a "Welcome back" and asks,

“What kind of cake did you get?”
“… A round one. Make sure you finish it, Sendai-san.”
“Of course.”

Her cheerful reply lightens my mood.

“What are you doing, Sendai-san?”

Setting down my bag, I stash the cake in the fridge and approach her at the counter, busy with something.

“Preparing dinner.”
“What? You’re cooking?”

This wasn’t the plan.
We intended to skip cooking tonight and order a pizza delivery with cake after.

Same as last year.
We decided in the morning together.

“I’m making fried chicken, caprese, and pasta now.”
“…Caprese?”

An unfamiliar word halts me, prompting a question.

“Yes. Don’t like it?”
“I don’t know, since I don’t know what caprese is.”
“Oh, it’s an Italian dish of sliced tomatoes and mozzarella cheese, seasoned with salt, pepper, olive oil, and basil.”
“Like a salad, then?”
“Hmm, something like that. Lend me a hand, will you, Miyagi?”

Already prepped for frying, Sendai-san cheerfully proceeds with her tasks.

“Didn’t we agree on pizza?”

Having returned expecting to do nothing, the sudden workload is daunting.

“The chicken’s ready to fry and caprese just needs slicing.”
“And the pasta?”
“Just needs to be boiled. With a ready-made sauce, it’s simple.”
“I guess.”

If asked whether it's complex or simple, then it's certainly simple. For pasta, just submerge in boiling water, and the sauce, either microwave or immerse in water.

“So, no complaints and help out.”
“It’s too early for dinner.”
“It’s fine to eat early. Slice the tomatoes and mozzarella into around five-millimeter, up to a centimeter thick pieces.”

Today's protagonist is hard working and won't be slacking, it seems.

As proof of this, Sendai-san, who turns twenty today, diligently plunges breaded chicken into the fryer. This compels me, the one celebrating, into action.

“Why is the birthday girl cooking dinner? You should just relax.”

Retrieving the tomatoes from the fridge, I can't help but grumble at Sendai-san.

“A birthday only comes once a year.”

“Which is why I think you should take it easy,” I retort, placing washed tomatoes on the cutting board. Sendai-san glances at me.

“I want to spend this once-a-year occasion doing something with you. Last year, we had pizza together, so this year, let’s enjoy a meal we’ve made together,” she suggests in a soft tone, a gentle smile on her face. As she prepares the pot for the pasta, she continues, “Honestly, I wanted to go cake shopping with you too. But since I couldn’t, I thought it was nice that I got to make you look cute instead.”

With that, she takes a closer look at me.

“Your taste is awful,” I huff, scowling at Sendai-san, whose cheerfulness is annoyingly contagious.

I couldn’t refuse today, being her birthday, but altering my appearance to this extent feels pointless. Even with minor changes, I won't turn into someone like Sendai-san.

“No, I have great taste. Everything suits you perfectly,” she replies with a cheerful demeanor. She often speaks frivolously, but while her taste is indeed good, it just doesn't suit me. Thus, I regard her taste as terrible.

Exhaling deeply, my gaze falls to the tomatoes.

“Keep an eye on those fried chicken pieces, Sendai-san. I don’t want them to burn.”

“And you should slice the tomatoes and cheese properly; no overly thick cuts, alright?”

“I’m not going to cut them too thick,” I retort, throwing a sidelong glare at the distrusting Sendai-san before setting the knife to the tomatoes on the cutting board. Slowly, carefully. The sharp edge slices through the ripe red tomato with ease.

“…Isn’t your tomato slice closer to two centimeters thick?” she remarks, apparently watching the tomatoes instead of the frying chicken.

“Well, it all goes to the same place in the end,” I counter.

“I suppose you’re right,” her monotone reply comes, and I turn my glare from her back to the tomatoes. Determined, I resume cutting, striving for the thinnest slices possible.

Chapter 122

Because of Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 352

I was hoping for a day like last year.
However, it doesn't need to be exactly the same.

Last year, a large pizza and chicken nuggets adorned the table. This year, it's fried chicken, caprese, and pasta.

The location is different as well. Last year, it was in Miyagi's room, but today it's in mine. Moreover, we are no longer roommates.

What truly matters isn't that everything is identical, but that Miyagi is in front of me, making today just as special.

"Celebrate my birthday next year too."

These were the words I uttered last year, which Miyagi hadn't forgotten.

"Sendai-san, we're saving the cake for later, right?"

Across the table, Miyagi remarks with an unusually sour face for a birthday, a look that hasn't changed since last year.

No, it never changes. When she's in front of me, her default mode is to be grumpy. A cheery disposition is practically nonexistent.

"If you want to have the cake now, I don't mind," I say with a smile.

A slightly lower voice responds, "It's your cake, Sendai-san. It doesn't matter to me."

"But you bought the cake, so you decide."

"Well then, let's have the cake later and eat first. Oh, and Sendai-

san…”

Miyagi says in her monotone way, fixing her gaze on me. But she doesn’t say anything further. She looks like she has something to say but remains silent while staring at me.

“And?” I prompt her.

Miyagi frowns slightly, exhales, and in a small voice, she speaks.

“…Happy birthday.”

My heart skips, and I feel a warmth spreading in my chest.

On the night of August 22nd, technically after midnight on the 23rd, multiple messages saying “Happy Birthday” came flooding in.

It’s something that happens every year, and while it’s pleasant, those words are not extraordinary, as they're what anyone would send to someone on their birthday. They don’t cause any huge excitement or physical reaction within me.

But when Miyagi says it, those ordinary words become uniquely mine.

“Thank you.”

“…I'll eat.”

Miyagi mutters, lowering her gaze awkwardly. Her eyes land on the calico cat chopstick rest instead of me.

She still hasn’t said the customary “Let's eat.”

She’s just having an intense staring contest with the calico cat chopstick rest, probably because she’s too flustered after saying “happy birthday” to look at me. And that, I find utterly adorable about her.

On top of everything, today, Miyagi is wearing makeup I did, with the hairstyle I braided, in the clothes I picked—making her exceptionally cute. Honestly, I didn't want her out in the world like this. I wish I could keep her indoors, just to admire the Miyagi I created.

However, the makeup, the hairdo, and the makeover were the price for letting her go out alone. Therefore, I couldn't insist on her staying in.

At the very least, I wished to see her carrying the bag I bought, which I told her was hers, and walk under the sun.

"Aren't you eating?" I probe the still-hesitant Miyagi.

As much as I'd like to keep staring at this adorable Miyagi, the pasta and fried chicken will get cold if we linger. Since we made them together, I want us to enjoy the meal before it turns cold.

"I said I would eat."

Miyagi lifts her face from the calico cat chopstick rest and takes a deep breath.

"Let's eat."

Our voices synchronize as we say it.

It may be a trivial thing, but on a unique day like my birthday, our words harmonizing fills me with joy.

Miyagi smiling would have been perfect, but I'm not a penguin, which she likes. Having Miyagi celebrate my birthday is enough.

I take a big bite of the caprese.

The elasticity of the mozzarella is delightful. Although Miyagi cut the tomatoes a bit thick, it doesn't bother me. The cheese's mildness mingles with basil's refreshing aroma, making me want more than just one bite.

"The caprese you made is delicious, Miyagi."

"You did the seasoning, though, didn't you?" Miyagi complains while eating her caprese.

However, she only eats the tomatoes and mozzarella, leaving the greens untouched.

“Don’t you like basil?”

“Not particularly.”

She answers curtly, not touching the basil as she casually twirls pasta around her fork, bringing a fairly large bite to her lips.

“Is it good?”

The sauce is simply a reheated carbonara, so it shouldn’t be bad. Still, I watch Miyagi munch on her pasta, curious about the taste.

“Eat your food too, Sendai-san.”

I ask again, “How is it?”

“It’s good.”

Miyagi replies tersely, munching on fried chicken.

It seems the meal is satisfactory.

Ordering delivery pizza like last year wouldn’t have been bad, but cooking for a birthday leaves a memorable impression and sharing that with someone is worth the effort.

Today engraves itself in my memory, embedding the same in Miyagi’s. I want to keep repeating such days until Miyagi is my world, and I am hers, leaving no room for others to encroach.

I twirl pasta around my fork like Miyagi did and take a mouthful.

The affordable carbonara tastes amazing. Biting into the fried chicken yields nothing but tasty thoughts.

Today is a good day, I believe.

The caprese, the fried chicken, they’re delicious, and so is the pasta with pre-packaged sauce. Despite their simplicity, I find myself wanting to eat them tomorrow and the day after as well.

I fixate on Miyagi. She’s picking out the basil while eating the caprese.

“Miyagi... thanks for living with me.”

I’m glad I didn’t manage to become like my older sister. I’ve embraced being my own person since entering university, and it was the best decision to make. Had I followed the path my parents expected, I wouldn’t have met Miyagi nor been here today.

“What’s with the sudden sentiment?”

“I just wanted to share my feelings now.”

“…Don’t you think living alone would’ve been better?”

“I don’t. If I were alone, today wouldn’t be joyful. I’m glad Miyagi is here.”

I touch the four-leaf clover at my chest.

Hazuki's leaf.

This kind of thoughtfulness when giving a necklace could only come from Miyagi.

“You’re exaggerating, Sendai-san.”

“I’m not. Thanks to you, I remembered what fun feels like.”

Birthdays that used to be fun had somehow turned into just a day where I changed my age and responded with "thank you" to the "happy birthday" messages from friends after the date changes.

I thought that was how my birthdays would always be.

But it’s different now.

“…What does ‘fun’ mean to you, Sendai-san?”

“Days like today.”

Birthdays have become something I look forward to even more than in the past when my family would celebrate them with me, and they have become truly fun occasions. Even days that aren't my birthday have become enjoyable. This is all because Miyagi is in my life every day, and I can't imagine a day without her.

"We're just having dinner together."

Miyagi murmurs as she takes a sip of soda. I can almost see the invisible soda passing down her throat.

If I could, I'd love to see inside her, to watch the journey of the meal we cooked together.

"We'll have cake too."
"I know, but we eat together on regular days too."

Once more, she drinks her soda, and watching her throat move makes me want to reach out and touch it, but instead, I clutch the clover necklace tightly and let go.

"But days like this are fun. It was always dull before I met you, Miyagi."
"…But you had so many friends."
"The number of friends doesn't matter."
"…Are you happy now?"
"Yes, but without you here, Miyagi, I wouldn't feel this happiness. — Thank you."

Even after my relationship with my family fractured, there were moments of happiness. Yet, that "happiness" wasn't genuine. Life before Miyagi was like a mirage.

"It's not like I've done anything."
"You don't have to; just stay with me always."

Miyagi looks at me, then averts her eyes as if in distress. She silently munches on her fried chicken, saying nothing more.

I wish she would assure me she'd always be there, but I understand it's a difficult ask, and I don't want to force it out of her.

I'll wait for the day she truly wants to be with me forever. I love Miyagi for not uttering convenient phrases during such moments.

"Miyagi, celebrate my birthday next year too."

I pick up the glass of clear liquid in front of Miyagi.

She looks at me, offering no complaints. I take a sip of the fizzy, not delicious liquid.

"Already talking about next year when we haven't even had cake yet?"

"Yes, it's a reservation for next year. I said I'd keep wishing for it forever, didn't I? You haven't forgotten, right?"

As I smile, a crease forms on Miyagi's brow.

"…I remember, no need to spell it out."

"Thank you."

My nineteenth birthday was the happiest among the nineteen I'd had.

My twentieth birthday is even happier than the nineteenth.

With Miyagi by my side, my twenty-first birthday promises to be even more joyful.

"…Sendai-san, I'll go fetch the cake."

Miyagi quietly starts piling up the empty plates.

"But I'm still eating pasta."

"It'll be finished soon, so it's fine."

With that, she stands up abruptly. "Wait, I'll join you," I say quickly.

"No need. The birthday girl should stay put."

Miyagi glares at me as she leaves the room. Naturally, I follow her.

"Why are you following me?"

As soon as we reach the shared space, Miyagi complains with a face full of displeasure.

"I want a kiss. …Can I?"
"No."

By the refrigerator, Miyagi glares at me like a black cat with its fur raised. If I reach out, I might get bitten. Yet, I still want to stroke her sleek fur and touch the lips veiling those fangs.

I move closer to Miyagi and reach out. My hand touches her cheek.

There's no bite, but she grips my arm and pulls.

"I'll do it."

Before I can utter a word, her lips, like an ill-tempered black cat, press against mine. It's just a brief moment before the warmth slips away.

"…Make my birthday fun too, Sendai-san."

Her words, almost lost, are accompanied by a soft nudge at my foot. That soft, low voice delights me, and without asking, I press my lips against hers again.

Nibbling gently on those soft lips, I draw her closer. Miyagi tenses slightly in my arms, but before I can entwine our tongues, she pushes me back by the shoulders.

"I never said you could start kissing, Sendai-san."
"Was it bad?"
"You should know without asking."

Miyagi, sulking, pushes me further away. Missing the warmth, I grab her arm, only to have my hand slapped gently.

"Even though it's my birthday..."

Just being with Miyagi is enough. That's how I feel, but I still wish I could kiss her more.

"Being your birthday doesn't mean you can do anything you want. Reflect on that and fetch the cake yourself."
"What will you carry, Miyagi?"
"Nothing."

Despite her cute appearance, Miyagi says unkind things. But I find even those sides of her adorable, and I close the distance to plant a

kiss on her cheek.

Because of Miyagi (II)

Part 353

I was left behind in the shared space with just the cake. Miyagi wasn't angry, but she had taken the plates and forks and gone ahead to my room.

I should have kissed her earrings.

Though there is no right or wrong in kissing, the kiss I should have given Miyagi after she asked me to make her birthday enjoyable was a kiss to her earrings.

"Well, no matter where I kissed, I would have ended up alone here."

I warm up the knife, take the cake out of the fridge, and return to the room where Miyagi is waiting.

"Welcome back. Did you reflect?"

Miyagi, seated upright on the floor, greets me.

"I'm back. I reflected deeply on my actions," I reply cheerfully, only to meet with a skeptical gaze. "I've turned over a new leaf," I add, placing the cake in the center of the table.

"Miyagi, you open the box."

"I don't mind opening it, but put the knife down."

"I warmed it up, though."

"Then, could you put it back in the kitchen first?"

Following Miyagi's instructions, I place the freshly acquired knife back in the kitchen. Upon returning to the room, the cake is already taken out of the box.

"Oh."

I forget to sit down, staring intently at the cake.

A small, dazzling white cream strawberry cake. A chocolate message plate with "Happy Birthday" inscribed on it.

And then. And then—

Candles shaped like the numbers "2" and "0" perched upon the small cake.

"I remember you saying last year that you wanted number candles," Miyagi says, avoiding my gaze, lighting the candles. I sit down opposite her.

"You remembered. Thank you."

Last year, I asked Miyagi if she wanted number candles on her birthday. She said she didn't, but she has put them on for my birthday.

Miyagi remembers my small wishes and makes them come true.

I touch the clover necklace, its chain shorter than the moon necklace. As I held it tightly, Miyagi silently turned off the main light and switched on the night lamp. In this half-lit darkness, a small voice whispered, "Happy Birthday."

"Thank you."

I respond in a voice as small as Miyagi's, and she replies with a voice slightly lower, yet still gentle.

"Sendai-san, blow out the candles."

"What about singing?"

"No singing."

Being distinctly told so, I blow at the "2" and "0" that illuminate the cake. The candle flames are extinguished, plunging the room into darkness before the lights come back on.

"I'll go get the knife."

With that, I head to the shared space, reheat the knife, and return. I hand the knife to Miyagi without allowing her to object and take my place across from her.

"The knife is warmed up, so go ahead and cut it."

With a smile, I say this, and Miyagi makes a puzzled face.

"Me?"

"You, Miyagi."

I assertively state it.

"…The cake?" comes her questioning reply.

"Yes. Since it's my birthday, Miyagi, you cut the cake."

"I'll definitely mess it up."

"It's fine if you mess it up. It ends up the same in our stomachs, right?"

"…True, but—"

"Since I’m asking you to cut it, just do it. No need to be precise."

I smile and add, "Please," as Miyagi furrows her brows reluctantly.

"Don't blame me for how it turns out."

Miyagi lifts the 'Happy Birthday' chocolate plate from the white cake and places it on my plate, saying, "It's yours, Sendai-san," then removes the candles and slowly sinks the knife into the center of the cake.

The knife draws calmly from the center toward the outside.

Miyagi is retracing what I did last year.

There were no number candles back then, but the process of cutting the cake hasn't changed. Knowing I exist in her memory makes me happy.

My phone is on silent mode and sits idle. No interruptions. I wish this moment could last forever.

"It's cut."

Miyagi mutters, placing two pieces of cake on my plate and two on hers, adding as if justifying herself.

"Because it's your birthday."

The meaning of her words is evident just by looking at the cake. Mine are clearly larger.

"It looks like I'll gain weight."

Although it's a whole cake, it's still small, so even if the cake on the plate is big, it's not like I can't eat it. And it's my important duty to eat every last bit of the cake, so I have no complaints. Still, everything Miyagi does is so cute that I can't help but tease her.

"It’s okay to gain a little weight, isn’t it?"

Miyagi says irresponsibly with a flat tone.

"If I gain weight, you'll join me for walks."

"No way."

"Stingy."

"You can call me stingy, but just eat the cake quickly."

"Okay, okay."

I say "let's eat" before I crumble the cake with my fork and take a bite.

It's delicious.

The cream melts on my tongue; it's sweet yet not overpowering, and together with the soft sponge, it passes smoothly into my stomach. Its aftertaste is refined, and naturally, my hand moves to cut the next bite.

"Miyagi, it's really delicious. Thank you."

"Thank the cake shop."

Miyagi replies curtly, continues with "let's eat," places the strawberries on her plate, then digs into the cake with her fork.

"Delicious."

She murmurs, taking another bite.

I also slice a piece with my fork and bring it to my mouth.

Today, gently enveloped by the pure white cream, melts into me, turning into memories I won't forget.

The more I eat, the more today layers within me like a mille-feuille.

One large slice of the cake disappears, and I move on to the next.

"Oh, Miyagi."

As the soft sponge makes its way to my stomach, I remember what I need to do today.

"What?"

"We forgot to take pictures."

Switching my phone to camera mode, I hear Miyagi’s short retort, "No way."

"I didn’t say I would be taking pictures of you, you know."

"You just said it."

"Come on, just one or two. Listen to the birthday girl's wishes."

To mark the occasion of my twentieth birthday, celebrated with Miyagi, I capture her and the cluttered table on my phone before sitting next to her.

"I didn't say you could come over."

"Just let me take one together."

I seize her arm, pulling her close. Switching to the front camera, I hold the phone up.

"Okay, taking it now."

Without waiting for her answer, I press the shutter, capturing a smiling me and a disgruntled Miyagi in the photo.

"Annoying."

A low voice echoes.

"Come on, just one more. It'll be nice."

"I don't want to."

"Smile."

Even though I ask with a cheerful voice, she doesn't smile, but she does smooth out the crease on her forehead, so I take another shot.

Smiling brightly alongside Miyagi, who looks slightly less grumpy in the second photo, I capture the moment before she declares, "That's the last one," and lightly nudges my shoulder.

"Stingy."

I place my phone on the table and lean against the bed. Placing the tissue-holding platypus on my knees, I look at Miyagi.

"Do you remember? We talked about having a drink together on your birthday."

When I ask, she responds in a flat voice, "I don’t remember."

"That’s a lie."

"It’s the truth."

"You definitely remember. We promised, didn’t we?"

"We didn’t make any promises," she retorts.

"So you do remember."

When her birthday comes, Miyagi will also be turning twenty. That's why I suggested as a celebration, we should have a drink together.

Of course, we hadn't actually promised. That's why I want to make it a promise.

If things continue like this, I won't get to know how she is when she drinks. Her birthday will pass, and there'll be opportunities for her to drink without me knowing what she's like. That thought alone is too terrifying.

"If you remember, then promise me."

I whisper into Miyagi's ear, "Don't forget, we're having drinks together on your birthday," planting a kiss on her earring and then one on her neck.

Placing the platypus back on the floor, I gently bite her neck. After another kiss, I run my tongue lightly over her skin, and Miyagi gently pushes my shoulder away.

"We're not doing that today."

"Why not?"

"Because of this."

Miyagi says in a hushed voice, pulling a box I've never seen before from under my bed.

"Here."

She presses the box into my hands with a small voice.

"What is this? Why was it under the bed?"

"I placed it there when I set down dinner."

"I see."

"Never mind the details, just open it."

Following her instructions, I carefully remove the wrapping paper and gently open the box.

"...A gift?"

Inside the box are two mugs. One features a calico cat, and the other a lounging black cat.

"It’s not really a gift. Just take it."

"But I’ve already got a birthday present."

Miyagi had already given me a delightful birthday gift—the promise of going to a festival together.

"I just felt like giving you this. I didn’t say it was a birthday gift."

"I see. Thank you."

Though we have mugs in this house already, none are cat-themed or gifts from Miyagi. They are still usable, but alongside the cat chopstick rests from last year, using any mug but these cat mugs seems unthinkable.

"From tomorrow, we’ll be using these mugs. Which one do you want, Miyagi?"

"They’re both yours, Sendai-san."

"I can’t use them both alone. Please use one, Miyagi."

"...Which cat do you like, Sendai-san?"

"Hmm, the black cat, I guess."

"Then I’ll take the calico."

"Got it."

The dishes in this house were bought after we moved in, so they have their charm, but nothing holds more affection for me than something given by Miyagi.

Someday, I hope all the things we use are chosen by Miyagi. If everything around me could be enveloped by her, I'm sure I'd be even happier.

"Miyagi, you're unfair."

I gently close the box containing the mugs, glancing sideways.

"I'm not unfair."

"You are."

I'd been entertaining the idea of spending the night with Miyagi, but thanks to the mugs, it turned into something even better.

That makes Miyagi truly unfair. But it's that very nature of hers that makes me want to be with her.

I squeeze Miyagi's hand tightly.

Because of Miyagi (III)

Part 354

Perfectly cooked sunny-side-up eggs with perfectly toasted bread. The ham was exquisitely grilled, and the tomatoes were neatly sliced. Breakfast preparation was going smoothly.

I slept well last night, and as a twenty-year-old, I feel great.

Humming a cheerful tune, I place the calico cat chopstick rest in front of Miyagi, prompting her to say, "Sendai-san, let me help, after all."

"Miyagi, just sit and relax. It's my way of thanking you for yesterday."

I place the black cat chopstick rest on the breakfast-laden table and pause just as I was about to take out a glass from the cupboard. My eyes move to the black cat and calico cat mugs that Miyagi gave me yesterday.

I usually drink orange juice from a glass, but that doesn't mean it can't be enjoyed from anything else.

Taking out the two brand-new mugs, I set them on the table. After fetching the carton of orange juice from the refrigerator and filling the mugs, Miyagi looks at me and asks, "Sendai-san, do you really enjoy preparing breakfast this much?"

"I do," I reply.

Everything around me is the same as always except for the mugs. The familiar table and chairs, the refrigerator, and the cupboard—they're all the same as before my birthday.

Miyagi hasn't changed either. As usual, she sits in the chair with a slightly grumpy expression.

Yet, because of this unchanged scene, I feel joyful and happy.

The fact that today is just like yesterday lifts my spirits.

"Here you go, Miyagi, your mug."

I place the calico cat mug in front of her.

"…Thank you."

"You're welcome."

I return to my seat, placing the black cat mug in front of me, and put the carton of orange juice back in the fridge. Taking my seat, I say to Miyagi, "Shall we eat?", and we both say "Let's eat" in unison.

Small things like this are delightful and joyous. My birthday was yesterday, but the happiness continues today.

I spread butter and jam on my toast and take a bite.

Despite using the same bread, butter, and jam as always, it tastes three times better. I savor the egg, ham, and tomatoes. Everything tastes so good; I almost feel as though my cooking skills have improved.

"Sendai-san."

Miyagi calls while quietly munching on her toast with butter and jam.

"What is it?"

"…Did you receive any birthday presents?"

She mumbles, taking a sip of the orange juice from her calico cat mug.

"You mean from friends?"

"…Yes."

"I haven't received any."

"Why not?"

"Since summer break started, I haven't had the chance to meet with them. They've promised to give me something once university resumes."

Some friends invited me to hang out over summer break, but I declined. Even those who wanted to meet solely to give me a birthday present were turned down, so there's no "present from friends" in my possession.

The only present I received was the mug set from Miyagi, who isn't a friend or a roommate.

"…What about Mio-san? You did meet her over the summer break, right?" Miyagi quietly asked.

"Mio wanted to meet on my birthday, but I declined. She's been insisting on giving her present directly and celebrating my birthday, but I told her she could wait."

"Was she okay with that?"

"Not really. She kept asking how long she should wait."

My friends from university are generally accommodating, or rather, they don't pry too deeply. If I say I have plans or am busy, they usually give up after two tries.

But Mio is different. She keeps contacting me and trying to meet up without giving up.

Miyagi seemed to expect this, commenting, "That's just like Mio-san."

"Really is classic Mio."

Despite her persistence sometimes being a hassle, I don't dislike her. Her constant care and oddly nonchalant manner make it hard to resent her.

"…Anyone else?" Miyagi mumbled as she ate her sunny-side-up.

"Anyone else?"

"You received something last year, didn't you?"

Something I received for my nineteenth birthday.

Even when she mentioned it, nothing came to mind. I open several drawers in my memory, sifting through last year's birthday, and soon a cookie rolls into view along with the image of a tutoring student.

"…Kikyo-chan?"

Last year, Kikyo-chan gave me homemade cookies as her birthday present to me.

"Doesn't matter who. Was there anyone else?"

"If you're talking about Kikyo-chan, she gave me the same cookies as last year, a bit early for my birthday, though."

"I see."

Miyagi replies in a low voice, taking another sip of orange juice. No further words follow.

As for what happened to those cookies—Miyagi didn't ask, and they ended up in my stomach.

I'm glad the gift from Kikyo-chan wasn't something that stayed in this house. Likely, the sentiment behind the "homemade" aspect was too heavy for me to bear, neither suitable to remain here nor to be shared with anyone else.

Last year, I'd thought about sharing them with Miyagi, but it was good that she declined.

"Oh, right. The festival is this weekend, by the way."

As she quietly continues with her toast, I remind Miyagi about the summer vacation plan I was looking forward to—her promised birthday present to me.

The topic of my tutoring job isn't one Miyagi likes. Although she isn't visibly upset, it's better to shift the conversation from something that shouldn't be continued.

"…This weekend?"

Miyagi furrows her brows, looking at me.

"Yes, on Saturday."

"That's quite sudden."

"Didn't I say it’d be after my birthday? Whether I said it early or late, it doesn’t change the fact that we're going."

I smile broadly at Miyagi.

Chapter 123

What Sendai-san Chooses (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 355

"Happy Birthday!"

The loud voice of Ami flows out of the smartphone. On the screen, a smiling Ami and Maika, who has returned home and is visiting Ami's house, are visible.

"Save that for Sendai-san, not me," I say to Ami, who seems unnecessarily cheerful. She responds with a quick, "I was planning to, but since she's not around, I thought I'd tell Shiori instead. Your birthday's next month, right?"

Ami adds me as a kind of afterthought and repeats, "Happy Birthday."

"It's way too early," I protest. "Don't worry, I'll say it again next month," Ami assures me, thumping her chest dramatically and making herself cough. Next to her, Maika giggles, making me feel like I've returned to our high school days.

How nostalgic.

I remain seated on the bed, stretching out my legs. Though I'm not wearing a school uniform skirt, it feels like I can see that familiar skirt. But now, having become accustomed to a certain someone always being around, I don't wish to go back to those times.

"Shiori, hasn't Sendai-san come back yet?"

When Maika asks, I tell her the truth with a "Don't know," prompting Ami to speak in an exaggerated tone.

"Maika, this is serious. Our plan to celebrate Sendai-san's birthday might fall apart."

"It's not that serious. You only just brought it up."
"With things like this, you have to act immediately when you think of them!"

Eager to congratulate Sendai-san via video call, Ami doesn't realize that the one to be celebrated is away and nowhere to be seen.

And where she's gone remains unclear.

After having breakfast together, she said she was going out for a bit, and it's been over three hours since. Left alone, I'm staying in my room as if on house-sitting duty.

"Ami, why not give up? Sendai-san doesn't seem like she'll be back soon."

I suggest, and Maika agrees on the other side of the smartphone, "Yeah, probably." Ami makes a whining noise. I tell her again.

"Ami. Seriously, I have no idea when Sendai-san will be back."
"Ehh–"

It sounds like the petulant voice of a whining child. Yet I'm the one who feels like complaining.

This isn't right.

Three hours is definitely not "a bit," and if "a bit" wasn't doable, she should have said "a while" or given a return time, something more accurate.

Besides, even though she said she was heading out alone, after over three hours without coming back, I'm starting to doubt if she's really by herself.

Maybe she's meeting up with Mio-san. Or someone else. Or perhaps meeting her tutoring student.

These silly thoughts bother me.

If she had returned in just a bit as she claimed, I wouldn't feel this way. It's really frustrating and maddening. I don't know what she's doing, but she should quickly come back and let Ami celebrate her.

Listening to Maika and Ami chat, I keep hurling my grievances against Sendai-san into the void where she is absent.

Instead of kicking the floor, I kick my own heel and glance at the door.

Of course, there won't be a sudden knock, nor the sound of approaching footsteps. Only Maika and Ami's voices are audible.

The voices from the smartphone continue, filling the room with their chatter. Ami talks about wanting to visit during winter break, and Maika laughs saying that would be impossible. I chuckle as well, knowing it's unlikely.

Ami had mentioned something similar before summer break, but couldn't save enough money to make it happen. Considering that, I doubt she'd manage to save enough by winter to visit. On the other side, Ami suggests I return home, too, but that's not feasible. I have no plans to go home during winter either.

"Ah, I think I should hang up soon," Ami suggests. Maika agrees with a "Yeah." Just then, a knock resounds on the door and Ami exclaims, "Wait."

"Isn't that Sendai-san coming back?"

On screen, Ami beams from ear-to-ear.

Another knock comes from the door, and Maika asks, "Aren't you going to answer it?"

Terrible timing.

I thought she should have been back sooner, yet now isn't the right moment. Though I figured she should be congratulated by Ami, now I don't want that to happen.

Sendai-san should only knock after I finish the call; she should just stand still in front of the door for now.

Yet, since there's a knock on the door, I can't ignore it. I tell the unseen person behind the door, "I'll open it now," trying to keep my voice gentle as I stand, walk slowly, and open the door. I hand over the smartphone showing Maika and Ami to Sendai-san and say,

"Here."

"Huh, what's this?"

"They want to talk to you," I reply, adding, "Maika and Ami." Immediately, enthusiastic voices cheer from the smartphone, "Happy Birthday, Sendai-san!"

"Thanks so much!"

Sendai-san responds with a voice as bright as today's sunshine.

Not amusing.

Maika had already sent a birthday message for Sendai-san in the group chat with Mio-san, so there was no need for a celebration now. Ami isn't that close to Sendai-san to necessitate congratulating her on her birthday.

Therefore, there's no need for Sendai-san to chat happily with these two.

Yet she does so joyfully. It truly isn't amusing.

"When are you coming back here, Utsunomiya?"
"Planning for September."
"I see."

Their lively voices bounce around like ping-pong balls.

Maika and Ami aren't doing anything wrong. They genuinely wanted to celebrate Sendai-san's birthday and are sincerely enjoying their conversation with her.

In moments like these, I'm always the odd one out.

I can't stand anyone getting close to Sendai-san, even if it's my friends.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san taps my shoulder, pulling me back into the world I had consciously shut out. She hands back the smartphone and says, "I'll be in my room, let me know when you're done talking."

Nodding like a broken machine, I acknowledge, "Okay," as Ami's loud voice takes over.

"Shiori, we got to celebrate with Sendai-san as planned, so I'm hanging up. See you."
"Yeah, see you."

I raise my voice to sound energetic, and Maika waves goodbye on the screen. Then both of them disappear.

"Sendai-san, it's over."

I call out to stop Sendai-san, who was on her way back to her room. She turns around and approaches me with a solemn look on her face.

"Hey, Miyagi... Do you have some time right now?"

The face she's making makes me want to say I don't.

"I think you can tell just by looking."
"Then, could you come to my room with me for a bit anyway?"
"What about lunch?"
"Can we do that after we're done?"
"…No."
"Why not? I'll make lunch later, just come with me."
"I won't. I have a bad feeling about this."

Matters that require us to be in Sendai-san's room instead of here...

Such things can hardly be good.

"It's about tomorrow," she says.
"The festival? I'm going, don't worry."
"I'm not worried about that. Anyway, just come to my room."

Sendai-san smiles brightly. My sense of foreboding doubles, and my body feels heavy. I don't want to move an inch from here.

But Sendai-san grabs my arm and pulls me along.

"It's nothing big."

She says, maintaining her smile.

It feels as if my feet are glued to the floor.

That's how it feels, but there's nothing I can do about it.

I feel extremely, extremely reluctant, but I have no choice.

I leave the room with Sendai-san.

What Sendai-san Chooses (II)

Part 356

"Miyagi, do you mind if I open the door?"

Sendai-san said something that didn't make any sense. We were standing in front of what was clearly the door to Sendai-san's room, not mine, so it was odd for her to ask if she could open it.

"It's your room, Sendai-san."

I pointed out something that should have been obvious and added, "Just open it already."

"I guess you're right..."

Sendai-san spoke hesitantly, taking a deep breath before exhaling. Then, with a resolute "Come in," she opened the door.

One step, two steps.

I entered Sendai-san's room. Her bed immediately came into view, prompting me to spin around.

"I'm going back to my room."

My foreboding feeling had been confirmed: a yukata I had explicitly said I wouldn't wear. Laid out on the bed were, not one, but two yukatas, presumably one for each of us.

I should have known better than to come to Sendai-san's room.

"Wait, Miyagi. Even if just for a little..."

She grabbed my arm. But my decision was made.

"No way. I'm leaving."

"Just wait three minutes."

"What, are you planning to make instant noodles or something?"

I shook off Sendai-san's hand and kicked her shin.

"Of course not! I just want to talk."

I didn't want to hear it. But then, Sendai-san started speaking.

"I know it's unfair and wrong to prepare a yukata when you said you didn't want to wear one. But I really want us to wear yukatas and go to the festival together."

She spoke earnestly, asking, "Which one do you like?" Although I hadn't intended to, her words drew my attention to the yukatas.

A lavender one and a pale, almost white one. Both adorned with beautiful flowers.

Not too flashy, yet not plain. The yukatas laid neatly on the bed reflected Sendai-san's impeccable taste, and it was frustrating.

"...I don't like either."

"I figured as much."

"Can I go back now?"

"No, you need to give me an order. I'll do anything."

Her response was absurd, and I glared at her.

"There's no fun in ordering someone who wants to be ordered around."

Issuing orders to someone eager to obey seemed pointless. I didn't dislike the obedient side of Sendai-san, but today, I wasn't in the mood for it.

"Should I start undressing?"

Sendai-san smiled, showing she didn't mind taking such a step.

"Pervert."

Today, Sendai-san was not being her usual self. Despite saying she'd do anything, she wasn't listening to me.

Even though she's given me her name, she's not entirely mine.

I reached out to Sendai-san, tugging at the clover necklace on her chest.

Like metal drawn to a magnet, she leaned closer, and I bit her neck.

So she wouldn't be able to go anywhere tomorrow—.

Strongly, forcefully.

I intended to leave a mark with my teeth, but couldn't muster enough strength to leave a trace. I pushed her shoulder to create distance between us.

Looking where I bit, her skin remained unblemished, only the clover indicating her belonging to me.

"Miyagi?"

Her puzzled voice met my ears, and I responded with an "Annoying."

I touched Sendai-san's T-shirt, placing my hand on her chest. My fingers slid over the fabric, gripping the hem.

Gently, I lifted it, touching her bare skin. Running my fingers over her ribcage, I pressed down.

It was warm.

Her smooth skin and soft flesh conveyed her body heat to my hand.

"Miyagi, you're such a perv."

"Coming from someone who suggested undressing?"

No matter what Sendai-san said, it didn't matter. I could move my hand and remove her undergarments or kiss her body.

After all, Sendai-san belonged to me completely, she even said she'd do anything.

So even though I should be able to do anything to keep her from going outside tomorrow, I couldn't. I retracted my hand from her body and sat on the floor.

"Miyagi, are you done?"

"Not really, but yes."

"...Will you wear the yukata?"

Sendai-san quietly asked as she sat down beside me.

"Did you buy the yukatas? Or borrow them?"

Instead of answering her question, I asked my own.

"I bought them. With that money... Sorry for using it without asking."

The mention of "that money" and her apology implied it was the money I had given Sendai-san, which she'd saved up, and which was now treated as "our money."

But that money isn't ours.

"It's your money, Sendai-san, use it however you like. But I won't wear a yukata."

"I bought them with our money, so you should wear one."

"That's unfair."

"That's why I said from the start that it was unfair and wrong."

"...Why do you want me to wear a yukata so badly?"

"For memories. Since we're going to the festival together, I want it to be special. Those kinds of memories last forever."

Hearing words I wasn't ready for, I closed my eyes tightly.

Memories with Sendai-san would accumulate, becoming a part of me.

It’s not that I wanted to reject everything, but I couldn't keep up with these emotions. I struggled to process the memories Sendai-san created.

She was always moving so fast, leaving me behind.

"...Did you buy the yukatas on your own?"

I asked without looking at her.

"Of course."

Sendai-san replied confidently, adding gently, "Take a proper look at them."

"Don't you have your tutoring job today, Sendai-san? Better get ready to go."

I did want to look at the yukatas, but I also didn't. Seeing them properly would mean I'd have to wear one.

"It's in the evening. I haven't even had lunch yet."

"You won't die from skipping lunch."

"No, but my stomach will growl in front of my student."

"Forget it."

"I have time, so I'll cook something now."

"Fine, let's have lunch, then."

As I attempted to stand up, Sendai-san tugged at my clothes.

"Your answer?"

I've been giving the same answer all along.

I won't wear a yukata.

There’s no other answer. But Sendai-san wouldn't accept it. She kept trying to coax her preferred answer from me, leading to a never-

ending exchange of pointless questions.

I settled back down and looked at Sendai-san.

"I don't know how to wear a yukata, and I can't put it on by myself."

I didn't want to say the answer she wanted, so I offered a new one.

"No problem. I looked up how to put it on, so I'll help you."

Sendai-san declared, brimming with confidence.

"No way, absolutely not."

"Alright, would you prefer if I taught you how to wear it yourself?"

"Still, no."

"Just out of curiosity, can you tell me why you don't want either option?"

"Something feels off about having Sendai-san do it, and I doubt I could manage it myself even if you explained."

"...Wait. What do you mean by 'something feels off'?"

Sendai-san asked seriously, leaving me at a loss for words.

This question wasn't any good either. Today's Sendai-san kept asking troublesome things.

I let out a small sigh and hugged my knees.

"Well... you can't wear a yukata without taking off your clothes first, right?"

If Sendai-san helped me, I'd have to undress in front of her, and I wanted to avoid that at all costs.

"Are you the type to wear a yukata over your clothes, Miyagi?"

"I'm the type to not wear a yukata at all."

"I see."

With a resigned voice, Sendai-san leaned back against the bed. She muttered to herself, "So it’s not possible, huh. What should I do with the yukatas?"

She never makes me do anything I truly hate. She never has. Even today, that hasn't changed, so it seemed I wouldn’t have to wear a yukata.

Feeling relieved, I relaxed. However, it also felt like the yukatas on the bed, whispered into nonexistence by Sendai-san's words, disappeared from the room, weighing heavily on my heart.

"...Are you going to give the yukata to someone else?"

I wondered about the fate of the unseen yukatas.

"No, I won't."

"Why not?"

"Because I picked it out for you, Miyagi."

Sendai-san smiled softly. Somehow, it felt like I could see the unseen yukata beyond her smile, and it made my heart ache.

At times like this, her kindness is like a thorn that pierces me and refuses to come out.

"...I'll give you an answer tomorrow."

"An answer?"

"On whether I'll wear the yukata."

"Really?"

"Sendai-san, I'm hungry. Please make lunch."

I got up and took a step forward.

"Ah, okay."

Her cheerful voice carried after me as I left Sendai-san's room,

where the yukatas lay.

What Sendai-san Chooses (III)

Part 357

"Ah, geez—!"

—If only I had said yesterday that I wouldn't wear it.

Because I postponed my response, it became difficult to refuse.

I lay back on my bed.

I'm going to the festival. I have no intention of breaking that promise. However, I never agreed to wear a yukata.

Lately, I've made a lot of effort to respect Sendai-san's wishes. That's why I don't think I need to compromise today.

There's no need to waver. Absolutely not.

I pick up my phone and watch the video on how to wear a yukata, which I've watched several times since yesterday. It doesn't look fun. And I also don't think the yukatas I saw yesterday would suit me.

Wear it, don't wear it, wear it.

I set my phone down, stand up with determination, and leave my room. I've already had lunch, and it's about time I give my answer.

After circling the kitchen and dining area once, I stand in front of Sendai-san's door. After glaring at it, I knock once, and when I hear her say "Come in," I enter the room.

"Have you decided?"

Sendai-san stands in front of the bed and speaks with a soft voice.

Behind her, I can see the same yukatas laid out just like yesterday. Her expression suggests it's already decided that I'll agree to wear it, and I furrow my brow.

Sendai-san always does things that aren't interesting at all.

I walk up to her and firmly stomp my foot down.

"...The wisteria-colored one is better."

I choose one of the yukatas that I saw yesterday, and lies at the same spot today.

"You're going to wear a yukata?"
"It's aggravating when you're like this, Sendai-san. If it's okay not to wear it, I won't."
"I want you to wear it. I bought this yukata because I think it'll suit you, Miyagi."

Sendai-san directs her gaze toward the beautifully blossoming wisteria-colored yukata.

"So, was this other one meant for you, Sendai-san?"

I look at the white, pastel-colored yukata that I didn't choose. Like the wisteria one, it has beautiful flowers, but they're not the same; different flowers are in bloom.

"I bought that one because I thought it would suit you too, Miyagi."

She says this as if it's obvious, and I look at her.

"…Which yukata are you going to wear, Sendai-san?"
"I'll wear the one you didn't pick. As long as I can wear a yukata with you, Miyagi, that's all that matters. I'm already prepared for dressing, so get undressed. I'll help you put it on."

Sendai-san has been in a good mood since morning, and she still seems cheerful.

She's smiling, completely excited about today's festival. I didn't intend to do this for her sake, but since today's festival is part of her birthday gift, I suppose I can let a few things slide.

However, the phrase "get undressed" is something I can't overlook.

I nudge her ankle with my foot that I used to stomp.

"There's a hadagi and a shitajime, right? Lend me those."

I researched it online yesterday. Hadagi and shitajime are the undergarments you wear with a kimono, and it's okay to wear them over your regular underwear. Also, they're simple enough for me to put on by myself.

So, even if Sendai-san helps with the yukata, there's no need to undress here and now. Everything should be after putting them on.

"Why? I'll help you put on the hadagi and shitajime too."

Sendai-san says cheerfully.

"I can put those on myself. I researched it properly."
"...Isn't that sneaky?"

I hear a dissatisfied voice and reply, "It's not sneaky. I can do it myself, so give them to me," prompting Sendai-san, with a reluctant expression, to pull out a bag containing a white set from under the yukata.

"Here, it's a combined hadagi and shitajime."

I take what she handed me with a "thanks."

"I'm going to put this on—wait here."
"Put it on here. I'll wait outside the room."

With that, Sendai-san tries to leave the room, and I call her back.

"One condition, Sendai-san."
"What is it?"
"I'll wear the yukata, but no touching my hair or doing any makeup."
"You're really stingy, Miyagi."

She responds with an exaggerated sigh but doesn't say anything about my hair or makeup. Sendai-san just says, "Let me know when you've changed," and leaves the room.

I stare hard at the yukata on the bed.

With a deep sigh, I take off my T-shirt and denim pants.

I put on the slip-like combined hadagi and shitajime that were prepared, and exhale deeply once more.

As protection for my body, they feel inadequate.

As I think about having to call Sendai-san in now, I feel gloomy and want to flee.

However, everything needed, like the obi and towels, is perfectly lined up on the bed, giving off an atmosphere where escape is impossible.

“Sendai-san, you’re such an idiot.”

I mutter quietly.
I wasn’t planning on wearing a yukata, but having had it bought specifically for me with the comment "I chose it for Miyagi," despite agonizing over it all night, has led to this situation.

Even so, regret is useless, and even if I did anything now, it’s already too late, so reluctantly, I call out to Sendai-san waiting outside the room.

“I’m dressed.”

Though not loud, she enters immediately. Picking up the yukata, she smiles gently, saying, "Miyagi, put your arms through the sleeves."

Following her instructions, Sendai-san comes in front of me and aligns the back seam of the yukata down the middle of my body, just like in the videos I've been watching since yesterday.

“Sendai-san, have you ever dressed anyone else in a yukata?”
“No, but there’s no need to worry. I’ve worn one before, a long time ago.”
"A long time ago?"
"When I got along well with my sister."

Sendai-san speaks nonchalantly and adds, “Let’s decide the length,” but the mention of her sister piques my interest.

"...Did you put it on yourself?"

Since she brought it up herself, it’s likely a past event she wants me to know about, one I probably don’t have to be hesitant to ask about. However, I feel like it’s not something you pry open quickly, but rather you should gently and politely unfold.

"I wanted to try putting it on myself, so I did it alone. Though I couldn't do it well, so my sister helped me. But today, I’ve watched a lot of videos, so it’ll be fine.”

Her voice isn't completely devoid of emotion, but it's not rich enough to convey her feelings either.

Sendai-san wears an expression that seems resigned to the fact that any scattered memories unearthed might be cast away without regret, and I quietly suggest, “You should do it while watching a video.”

"That might be a good idea, so I'll watch while doing it," she says as she plays the dressing video on her phone.

She determines the length and ties the koshi-himo.

With Sendai-san unusually close, my heart starts to pound.

She adjusts the extra fabric turned over at the waist—the "ohashori." A hand slips inside the yukata in a strange way, causing me to tense up.

Touching my body, or pressing her lips against me.

If it’s Sendai-san, it wouldn’t be unusual for her to take advantage of this closeness to try something, but she only mutters to herself as she neatly adjusts the ohashori.

“Are you okay?”

I gently inquire, and Sendai-san responds, "I'm fine. I’ll tie the chest cord next." Soon, a new cord is brought out and wrapped around beneath my chest.

Despite occasionally glancing at her smartphone, Sendai-san handles the task with surprising skill. It doesn’t seem like it's her first time dressing someone in a yukata.

Still, I'm starting to get fed up.

Sendai-san is too close, touching me here and there, making me uneasy.

I breathe in and out. I nudge her foot and pull her hair every now and then.

As I distract myself with trivial actions to push away the fluffy, restless feeling, the obi is tied and Sendai-san's satisfied voice reaches my ears, saying, "Done."

"Miyagi, take a look."

With a cheerful note in her voice, she shows me the mirror. And before I can say anything, she exclaims, "You look so cute!"

I want to retort that I'm not cute.

But I swallow the words and glare at Sendai-san instead.

"The obi feels weird."
"Does it hurt?"
"It's not painful, just bothersome."
"Well, you can't go without an obi, so endure it. You'll get used to it soon."

Sendai-san smiles warmly and continues speaking.

"Wait in your room, Miyagi. I'll put on my yukata now."
"No, I'll stay and watch."
"I don't think it'll be interesting to watch though."
"I'll decide if it's interesting or not."

I stare intently at Sendai-san. I wouldn't feel at ease just idling in my room with this yukata on.

Keeping busy with something will distract me.

And since I'm in Sendai-san's room, watching her is the best option.

"If you keep watching like that, it makes it hard for me to undress, you know."

“You mentioned getting undressed yesterday.”
“That was yesterday.”
“Yesterday and today are the same, so just get on with it.”
“You’re such a pervert, Miyagi.”

Sendai-san sighs and removes the oversized T-shirt she’d been wearing since morning.

Her pale blue underwear comes into view.

That elegant lace suits Sendai-san perfectly.

Sendai-san glances at me. Our eyes meet, and she turns away with an embarrassed look.

Her stomach swells and contracts slightly with her breathing rhythm, making me want to touch her there.

“You know, you’re the real pervert here, Miyagi.”

She grumbles and removes her skirt. The skin that was hidden beneath her clothes is fully exposed, and I draw closer to her.

I press my palm below Sendai-san’s collarbone.

“…Hazuki.”

I whisper softly and graze the four-leaf clover with my fingertips.

Sendai-san, nearly bare, is both lustrous and beautiful.

Surely, others aside from me have seen Sendai-san like this before.

For example, during P.E. class when changing. Or perhaps somewhere during school events.

But no matter what happened in the past, Sendai-san belongs only to me.

I place my lips on her collarbone and lightly bite. I stroke her side and lick her neck. Sendai-san runs her hand through my hair, embracing me gently.

“Miyagi, is it okay if I don’t put on the yukata after all?”

Her voice murmurs by my ear, and I escape from her arms.

“Do you plan on not going to the festival?”
“Of course we’re going. Although staying like this wouldn’t be so bad.”

Sendai-san chuckles and begins changing.

Following the video tutorial, it doesn’t take long before Sendai-san, who was in only her underwear moments ago, transforms into Sendai-san in her yukata.

The soft-hued yukata suits her well. It complements her hair, which is brown, lighter than mine.

The flowers are different, but because both my yukata and Sendai-san's are adorned with blossoms, they almost appear like matching pieces in different colors.

“How is it? Does it look alright?”

Sendai-san does a twirl in front of me.

“It looks fine.”
“Then shall we head out?”
“What about your feet?”
“What I’ll wear?”
“Yes.”
“I got matching geta sandals for us.”

With that, Sendai-san smiles gently.

Chapter 124

Miyagi Never Changes (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 358

"I don’t want to wear them."

The moment she saw the matching geta sandals, Miyagi said that with a sullen face, yet the girl walking next to me is wearing the same pair as me. This means we’re wearing the same geta, and also that I’m in a good mood.

Miyagi, dressed in a yukata, looks as pretty and cute as I imagined. Her black hair goes well with the wisteria color.

She looks so good in a yukata that I want to keep her locked at home to keep her away from others, but at the same time, I want to show her off to everyone.

I gently touch the four-leaf clover on my chest.

I think today is going to be a good day.

Even if Miyagi doesn’t exactly have a festival-friendly expression.

"Hey, Miyagi. Do you know where we’re going now?"

I ask with a smile, and though she stared at me so intently while I was changing, now she won't even meet my eyes.

"To the festival, right?"

"If you know that, why not try looking a little more cheerful?"

I look at Miyagi, who isn’t even trying to hide her bad mood.

"…Does it matter what face I’m making?"

"Festivals are meant to be fun, don't you feel like lifting the corners of your mouth?"

"I don't."

Miyagi replies curtly.

She never changes, no matter the time or place. Even on our way to the extraordinary setting of a festival, she shows neither friendliness nor consideration, looking as displeased as always.

Indeed, world-class sulkiness suits Miyagi best.

And I'm okay with her being that way.

I know how foolish it is to forcibly make her smile, and it's not like she's never smiled before, so I don't mind her sulkiness. No matter how grumpy Miyagi gets, she'll still smile when she wants to.

—Like when she smiled in front of the penguins.

No matter how much I try to make her force a smile, nothing will compare to that expression, so it's unnecessary. Still, I'd like to see her smile, so I inevitably tend to meddle.

"Alright then, let's take a picture, smile for me."

I take out my smartphone and point it at Miyagi.

"I definitely won't smile."

Along with a low voice, a hand reaches out to cover the camera. So, before she catches me, I snap a photo of a grumpy Miyagi.

"Sendai-san, delete that."

Miyagi's low voice reacts to the shutter sound, but I've no intention of complying. I put away the smartphone holding the image of Miyagi in her yukata and put on a smile.

"It's really hot, isn't it?"

Fanning my face with my hand, I look up at the culprit causing the consecutive thirty-degree summer days.

"It's summer. I don't really want to go to a festival in this heat."

Miyagi, unable to have the photo deleted, says in a resentful voice.

"It's okay, the festival isn't far, so it should be fine."

"Even if it's not far, I still don't want to."

"Don't say that. We're almost there, so walk a bit more."

"I'm walking without being told."

I chose a festival we could walk to from home. There aren't any grand fireworks, but there are food stalls and a procession.

Going on a trip by train to see fireworks.

Such plans crossed my mind, but I doubted Miyagi would agree, and what I wanted to see were not the fireworks, but Miyagi, so our destination was limited to places she'd be willing to go.

"I should've put my hair up."

I was so focused on getting Miyagi into a yukata, and once she was dressed, I hurried to leave the house before she could resist and refuse to go. So, here I am with the usual half-updo, nothing special.

I wish I could've shown off my blue earrings with the necklace.

"Raising your hair won't make it less hot."

Miyagi mutters, looking at me.

"It's the thought that counts."

"Then, it's fine. Sendai-san, every hairstyle looks good on you."

"…Does the yukata suit me?"

"I think it looks better on you than on me."

Miyagi is dangerous for my heart.

Usually, she doesn't compliment me, but unexpectedly does so at random times, shortening my lifespan.

Even with her sour face, she stares at me and adds, "I won't wear one, but you should wear it next year too," making me feel like I could perish under the scorching sun.

I'm not a fan of the blazing sun, the steamy summer air, or going out on sultry days they call 'midsummer days.'

But if it's with Miyagi, it's different. Everything—the sun that only raises the temperature, the air that makes you feel faint, Miyagi's words—everything makes my heart race.

Step by step, our matching geta click softly.

I can't remember the last time I wore geta, but being in matching ones with Miyagi makes me feel good.

The festival's din draws closer. Just walking beside Miyagi is fun in itself.

"The crowd's growing."

A voice filled with reluctance comes from beside me.

"The stalls are coming into view."

"Sendai-san, is there something you want to do at the festival?"

"What about you, Miyagi?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, Miyagi. Like trying to catch goldfish or playing with yo-yos."

"Goldfish sound like a hassle to take care of, and I don't need yo-yos."

Miyagi says indifferently, continuing to walk. I stride beside her. We quickly arrive at the shrine, and the crowd swells further.

"Miyagi, what do you want to eat?"

"The one who decided to come should take responsibility for choosing."

In the crowd, Miyagi lightly taps my arm.

Hmm.

I softly groan and look at the bold text of the lined-up stalls.

Shaved ice, skewers, fried chicken.

Countless other food items are listed.

"Sendai-san, is there something you want to eat at places like this?"

Back in high school, I'd just go along with others, so when asked what I want to eat, I'm at a loss.

"Uh, candy apples look tasty but tricky to eat… By the way, Miyagi, you mentioned going to a festival with Utsunomiya before; what do you eat at those events?"

"That question's unfair. Figure it out yourself."

I want what Miyagi wants to eat, but she seems unwilling to reveal it. That leaves me to find an answer myself as I gaze at the stalls.

"Hmm… cotton candy, maybe?"

"Do you like cotton candy, Sendai-san?"

"Well, I guess."

Cotton candy is nothing but transformed granulated sugar.

It's a food that's no more or less than that. If forced to choose between liking or disliking, I'd say I like it, but it's not something I particularly seek out.

Yet today, even cotton candy looks alluring.

"Let's share one."

As I say this and start walking, Miyagi follows. The cotton candy

stand is just up ahead, and I buy two after paying.

I want to see Miyagi eating fluffy cotton candy.

Just for that reason, as Miyagi reaches to pay for her share, I press a cotton candy into her hands.

"Thanks."

A small voice casually arrives. Miyagi lightly tears off a piece of the big cotton candy and pops it into her mouth.

The fluff whiter than clouds disappears into her mouth.

With a voice softer than the cotton candy, she quietly smiles, saying "Delicious."

"I'm glad."

It truly, truly was a good thing. Seeing Miyagi enjoy the festival makes me so happy.

I also tear off a small piece of cotton candy and pop it into my mouth.

Though it’s like the fluff one would imagine is inside Pen-chan, it’s incredibly delicious. It’s just sugar that melts into sweetness in my mouth, yet it makes me crave more and more.

While eating the cotton candy, I observe Miyagi. In her yukata, eating cotton candy, she looks genuinely adorable.

Though she doesn’t speak much, that's just how she always is and it doesn’t bother me.

As we eat our cotton candy, we wander through the shrine lined with stalls.

“Do you want to try grilled squid or baby castella?”

If we’re going to eat, it might as well be things we don’t often have.

“Do you like those kinds of things, Sendai-san?”

“They’re festival-like.”

Even if we're not talking the whole time, we continue to walk, sharing fun conversations when we do decide to chat. We walk to the end of the shrine and loop back.

Miyagi isn’t one to become talkative just because we’re out, but after finishing the cotton candy with what seemed like a good mood, she points to a nearby stall and says, “Let’s have takoyaki.”

“Sounds good. Looks delicious.”

We buy a box of takoyaki and head to a resting area with tables and chairs. Sitting down, we start sharing it between us.

Just like with the cotton candy, I watch Miyagi eating her portion of the takoyaki.

She gently blows on the takoyaki to cool it before eating it carefully to keep her yukata clean. She’s cute. While the corners of her mouth aren’t noticeably lifted, she eats with an expression of enjoyment.

I take one of the takoyaki from the half portion split for me.

Seeing Miyagi in a yukata and in seemingly good spirits was reason enough to come here.

As we leisurely eat the takoyaki, we hear voices announcing that the mikoshi is coming.

“Want to go see?”

I ask Miyagi, and she responds with "Yes." We buy baby castella as we start walking.

Amidst the crowd, Miyagi’s pace slows. The mikoshi comes into view, and loud, spirited chants fill the air.

Miyagi walks slowly, unhurriedly. I match her pace as we leave the shrine.

Amidst the courageous voices resounding, time moves gently and leisurely. It’s not the kind of time one expects at a bustling festival, but it suits me perfectly.

When I stop and look at Miyagi, she grips the sleeve of my yukata.

“Want to hold hands?”

I propose to Miyagi, but she instantly replies, “No.”

“If we don’t, we might be separated and get lost.”

“Would you, Sendai-san?”

“Miyagi might get lost.”

“I won’t get lost, I’m holding on here.”

Miyagi firmly states.

Miyagi Never Changes (II)

Part 359

As we stand amidst the crowd, the thought of holding hands crosses my mind.

Yet the festival remains delightful even without holding hands, and we're both wearing yukatas. Even if we get separated, it's a place we can find our way back from alone. With our smartphones, we can easily decide on a meeting point to reunite.

So, it's okay not to hold hands. And besides, Miyagi adorably holds onto the sleeve of my yukata, which is enough for me.

There are many reasons to justify not holding hands, and I smile at Miyagi.

“Do you want to watch the mikoshi a little longer?”

As soon as I pose the question, an eager "yes" escapes Miyagi’s lips.

While I wonder what she finds so enjoyable, Miyagi's gaze isn't on me, but rather focused on the swaying mikoshi that moves with energetic cheers.

It's the perfect summer scene, yet my eyes see only Miyagi.

Her cheeks that glow with a faint blush, perhaps due to the heat. Her eyes that don’t meet mine. Her plumeria earrings hidden beneath her black hair. Her yukata that suits her so exceptionally well.

I shift the arm that she clings to ever so slightly.

Her eyes finally meet mine.
With the mikoshi growing distant, I speak to her.

“Miyagi, open your mouth.”
“...Why?”
“I'll feed you some baby castella.”

I show her the bag of baby castella I had bought earlier. Miyagi furrows her brows and reaches her hand out, prompting me to move the bag away from her.

“You can't move it, Sendai-san.”
“I said I'd feed you.”
“...Then I don’t want it.”

With a low voice, she retracts her outstretched hand.

“Sorry. Just take one; it’s a treat.”

I hand her the bag, and she peers at me suspiciously. When I urge her again to eat, she plucks a baby castella from the bag, its sweet aroma filling the air as she takes a bite.

“Tasty?”
“Tasty.”

Answering softly, Miyagi takes another baby castella from the bag and eats it.

“Should we check out more stalls?”
“Are we leaving?”
“The mikoshi has moved on, but do you still wish to stay here, Miyagi?”
“...No, let’s see the stalls.”

We begin to walk again, eating the baby castella.

“Anything you want?”

We return to the shrine we walked by earlier, and I inquire with Miyagi.

“Not really.”
“How about something to eat?”
“Not really.”
“ 'Not really’ doesn’t help me understand.”
“I’ll leave it to you, Sendai-san.”

Even though she doesn’t have anything she particularly wants or wants to eat, I’m not ready to head back yet. No matter if it's for one

hour or two, I just want to keep walking alongside Miyagi.

Such is the somewhat trivial motivation for walking through the shrine, but to me, this reason holds immense importance.

Miyagi grips my sleeve tightly. I slow my pace and ask her.

“Do you want to hold hands after all?”
“No.”

Though her voice lacks kindness, the hand clutching my sleeve doesn't let go.

We leisurely stroll amidst the lively and cheerful atmosphere. The bag of baby castella empties, and I deposit it in the designated trash disposal.

Festivals are always crowded.
If you’re careless, you could easily be swept away by the waves of people.

Though the weight on my sleeve assures me of her presence, I occasionally glance at Miyagi beside me.

Even when our eyes meet, Miyagi says nothing.

Though it’s a time that might as well be called evening, there’s no breeze, and it’s not cool.
Sweat beads on my forehead.
Yet neither the heat, the crowds, nor the silent Miyagi bother me.

The tide of happy people feels comforting.
Miyagi’s pace slows.
We stroll so very, very slowly.

It’s too slow even for me, who wishes to walk with Miyagi for hours.

—Too slow.

It's so slow that it felt unnatural, it’s evident even without asking her.

“Miyagi?”

I turn my focus away from the stalls and towards her.

“Don’t look at me, Sendai-san; just walk.”

Miyagi pushes my arm brusquely.

“...Are you not feeling well?”
“It’s nothing.”

She responds immediately, almost angry.
Typically, her tone would just indicate a lousy mood, but something feels off.

Could it be...
No, it’s quite certain.

“...Your feet?”

I lower my gaze from Miyagi’s face.
I focus on her feet as she continues walking.
There are so many people that it’s hard to tell with everyone moving around.

But, all things considered, her matching geta seem to be the cause.

“Miyagi, your feet hurt, don’t they?”

I stop and grasp Miyagi's arm, clinging to my sleeve.

“They don’t.”
“Miyagi.”
“I’m fine.”
“You’re not fine. Show me your feet.”
“I’m telling you, it’s fine. Besides, stopping here will be in the way. Let’s go.”

With a voice more irritated than usual, Miyagi insists on continuing to walk.
However, her pace remains slow.

Steady, slow steps.

I look at Miyagi's face.
Her frown is deep.

Her eyes sharp.

In such times, it wouldn't even be surprising if she kicked me, yet she silently continues walking.

Only because we're outside.
Only because she's wearing geta.

She might refrain from kicking me just for those reasons, but considering her slow pace, there must be more to it.

The cause can only be strap chafing.

"Then let's go back to where we had takoyaki earlier. It's nearby, so let's head there and take a look at your feet."
"No way."

Miyagi states resolutely.
She seems unwilling to listen to what I have to say.

With things as they are, there's no choice.

I pull on Miyagi's arm and guide her to the spot where we had takoyaki, finding an empty seat and having her sit.

"I'm going to look at your feet, so I'll have to remove the geta."

I crouch down and touch Miyagi.

"No way."

With the short reply, Miyagi, who hadn't kicked me earlier, tries to now.

"I'm removing them, so please cooperate."
"No way."
"Please, listen to me."

I am a fool.

Miyagi, with a quiet demeanor, lacking words, seemed like her usual self to me, but that was never the case.

She wore a yukata she didn't choose to wear and donned unfamiliar,

new geta.

All of these are things she isn't accustomed to, yet she pushed herself without hesitation.

Her limited words.
The slow pace of walking.
The way she clung to my sleeve.

Looking back, they all lead to one answer: strap chafing.

I was so delighted that Miyagi was matching with me that I overlooked what was obvious.

“Miyagi, please, listen to me.”

Still crouched, looking up at her, I plead, meeting her eyes.

Her frown deepens.
Her mouth opens, then closes.

After a short while, a soft sigh escapes her, followed by a mumbled voice.

“...I’ll take them off myself.”

Miyagi removes her geta and ever so lightly nudges my knee with her foot.
I catch her foot and examine it closely.

Between the big toe and index toe.
From the base of those toes upwards a bit.

Clearly, it's reddened visibly.

“They must have hurt, right?”
“Not really.”

Miyagi mutters quietly.

I forgot that Miyagi is akin to a stray cat.

Even when she's feeling unwell, she keeps it concealed and never tells me. Like the time she caught a cold on the day we had plans to

see the penguins.

Miyagi never shows me her vulnerabilities. I had forgotten the regret I felt for not taking better care of her when I found her with a cold.

“Miyagi, I’m sorry.”
“There’s no need to apologize. I’m fine.”

Visiting the festival together, dressed in yukatas, and even wearing matching geta—those wishes of mine all came true, and I was so pleased with that alone, I failed to properly see Miyagi.

—I know better than anyone what Miyagi doesn’t like to do and what she struggles with.

“I’m truly sorry, Miyagi.”
“Stop making that face like something terrible happened.”
“Something terrible did happen. I’m really sorry.”
“It’s just my feet; it’s nothing to worry about.”

Today, I’ve forced Miyagi to walk slower than usual, and made her lie to me because of the pressure I put on her.

It’s awful. I missed something I usually should have noticed.

“This isn’t good. Let me go buy some sandals or something more comfortable for walking.”

I don’t want to leave Miyagi alone in a place like this, but I can’t just ignore this situation.

“No need. It doesn’t hurt anymore.”
“Liar.”
“Really.”
“I’ll go get them, so wait here.”

I stand up, thinking about where nearby I might buy something like sandals.

Cost doesn't matter.
As close and as quickly as possible.
A place like that—.

“...Are you telling me to stay here by myself?”

She tugs at my yukata sleeve.

“I’ll be back soon.”

“...I’d rather not be left alone in this kind of festive crowd. Forget the sandals... Stay here with me and enjoy the festival, Sendai-san.”

Miyagi says this in a voice so small it almost gets drowned out by the festival chaos, pulling on my sleeve again.

“...What about the geta?”
“I’ll go barefoot.”
“You can’t! You won’t make it home barefoot, and it solves nothing.”
“Sendai-san, your smartphone.”
“Eh?”
“Get it out.”

Though her voice isn't loud, the strength of her words compels me to bring out my phone.

“Use that phone and look up a solution for this situation.”
“Got it.”

Following her directions, I quickly find a possible solution for strap chafing with the smartphone.

“It says to apply a band-aid. I have some, but should I wipe it with a damp handkerchief before applying?”
“That means I’d be alone here. Just put it on as is.”
“Alright, let’s clean it properly once we get back. Let me see your foot.”

As I say this and crouch down, Miyagi obediently offers her foot. I carefully press a band-aid onto the reddened area.

“Something similar happened back in high school.”
“When you cut your finger with a knife, Miyagi?”

No answer. But I know she’s recalling the time I made fried chicken at her place. That day, while slicing cabbage, Miyagi cut her finger, and I bandaged it for her.

During that moment, licking Miyagi's blood, a part of her mixed into me. And now, there's even more of Miyagi that's become a part of me—something inseparable, like the blood from before. Moving forward, I hope that more of Miyagi will blend with me in the future.

"The band-aids you use aren't cute, Sendai-san."
"If you prefer cute ones, I can get those next time."

The band-aid I put on Miyagi when she cut herself was just something I carried around normally, but now it's different. I keep band-aids specifically for Miyagi.

"This is fine. It suits you, Sendai-san... Is it done?"

Both feet, right and left.
All the reddened areas are covered with band-aids.
I've applied several.

"Yeah. Try the geta on."

At my words, Miyagi nervously puts on her geta and stands up.

"Is it okay? Does it hurt?"

When I ask, she responds with, "Lend me your phone, Sendai-san."

"Eh? Why?"
"Just give it to me."

As I take my phone out of my bag, it quickly gets snatched from my hand.

What is she doing?

Before I can voice my question, Miyagi leans in. I wanted to ask what was wrong, but she gives me no chance, lifting the phone towards the sky.

Click.

A photo captures us in our yukatas. The phone returns to my hand with a snap.

“A thank you for the band-aids. Let’s buy some yakisoba and head home.”

Miyagi says, speaking so quickly I almost get left behind.

Miyagi Never Changes (III)

Part 360

I find it regretful.
But I also think it can't be helped.
After all, it was I who caused us to return home earlier than planned.

"Are your feet okay?"

I glance at Miyagi, who is sitting next to me using the bed as a backrest, and when she replies, "I'm fine," her feet—still red after the band-aids were removed—look painfully sore.

After buying yakisoba, we left the festival at the shrine by taxi. Once we arrived home, we promptly changed clothes and I washed Miyagi's feet in the bathroom, attempting to apply more band-aids, but she resisted.

Even as we sip on orange juice in my room after eating the yakisoba, Miyagi stubbornly refuses to let me apply the band-aids.

Honestly, Miyagi can be quite stubborn.

"Wouldn't it be better to put on a band-aid?"

I repeat the question I've asked many times since we returned, and she responds with the world's most exasperated voice.

"It’s fine. The band-aid bothers me, so I'd rather leave it as it is."

Miyagi hugs her knees, wiggling her toes.

Without socks, her toes are clearly visible, as is the redness, which pains my heart to see.

However, she seems utterly unconcerned about the redness and pain from where the straps of her sandals rubbed against her feet. She wears the same expression she always does—a mix of slight displeasure and boredom.

Yet, having changed from her yukata into denim pants, she seems considerably more relaxed, making me think returning home early was a good decision.

"Then, how about going to the hospital tomorrow?"

I gaze at her reddened feet.

"Sendai-san, you're overreacting. Tomorrow, I'm just going to laze around at home. I'm tired."

The word "tired" from Miyagi hits my head with a soft thud and tumbles down to the floor. I pick it up, telling her "Sorry" as if to collect it.

"I don’t like being apologized to in situations like this."
"Sorry."

I apologize again, and she pushes my arm, saying, “I said I don’t like it.”

"If it starts hurting, you have to tell me."
"I will, so let's stop talking about this."

Miyagi, still hugging her knees, covers her reddened feet with her hands. Then silence descends upon the room, banishing all words.

Looking at Miyagi's feet makes me want to apologize again, and I press on my throat to suppress the urge.

I glance at the platypus lounging under the table. Its goofy expression, sprouting a tissue from its back, lightens the ache in my heart just a bit.

"Hey, Sendai-san."

Miyagi calls me softly.

"Do your feet hurt after all?"
"It's not that. —Are other people's feet made of steel or something?"
"…Eh?"
"I mean, no one seems to have feet pain even when they wear geta."
"Ah, in that sense. Maybe it's a matter of getting used to them?"

"Are you used to them, Sendai-san?"
"I might be more used to them than you, Miyagi."

Whether she's trying to lighten the mood or asking sincerely, I can't tell.

In any case, Miyagi's unexpected comment about "steel" catches me off guard. Coupled with the platypus' stress-relieving effect, my guilt decreases by about half, bringing a smile to my face.

"Miyagi, you say some stupid things sometimes."
"Not as much as you do, Sendai-san."

She playfully smacks my knee. Our usual banter feels comforting. Lately, she's been helping me out a lot.

I place my hand gently on her denim-covered knee.

"...Pervert."

She utters quietly, to which I respond, "I haven't done anything yet."

"That means you plan to."
"Do you mind?"
"I do."
"Why?"
"Today was the day we were supposed to go to the festival together, so nothing else."
"You're stingy. It's not like we can't do other things on the same day."
"It's not okay."
"Then, can I kiss your feet? The red part."
"Sendai-san, you're such an idiot."

She echoes a line similar to what I said earlier, which is unfair. It was Miyagi who taught me these silly things, and I only copied them, so she should take some responsibility.

"Sendai-san, you're thinking about something weird again, aren't you?"
"I am."

I admit it quietly, and Miyagi moves a bit away from me. I press my hand more firmly on her knee, calling out, "Miyagi." She peels off

my hand rigorously and shifts further away.

"I'm just joking."

I say it more lightly than the tissue sprouting from the platypus and smile.

"When you say it, Sendai-san, it doesn't sound like a joke."
"Would you have preferred it if it wasn't a joke?"

I ask quietly, as Miyagi averts her eyes from me.

"...Why do you always want to do weird things on days like this, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi, not looking at me, hugs her knees again, wiggling her red feet.

"Days like what?"
"If you don't know, then never mind."
"Tell me. I'm curious."
"...Memorable days. Like Christmas or something."

Her small voice mumbles. Miyagi still won't look at me, so I can't see her expression clearly, but those words make me happy.

"Because I want you to remember me."

Of course, it's not that I only choose memorable days intentionally. I want the things on days that don't seem memorable to be remembered too.

"...But I want to use my memory for other things."
"What other things?"
"There's no need to explain them all to you, Sendai-san."
"Stingy. Tell me. For example, what would you use your memory for today?"

I tug on Miyagi's T-shirt, asking, and she pushes my shoulder with all her might.

"Ouch."
"I did that on purpose."
"Even if it hurts, tell me, Miyagi."

Saying so, Miyagi frowns at me, glaring. Then, she draws the platypus tissue cover closer, placing it between us.

"It’s irritating to say things like that after making someone wear a yukata and taking them to a festival."

This is it probably, albeit indirectly.

The "other thing" she wants to use her memory for is "the festival."

That makes me very happy, yet it also pricks my heart, and I lower my gaze to her feet.

"...Today's memory isn't that great, is it? You can overwrite it."
"That's for me to decide, not for you, Sendai-san."

Her dissatisfied voice reaches from beside me, thumping in my chest.

We wore yukatas together, matching geta, went to the festival, and ate delicious food.

I thought it would have been a good memory, but reflecting back, there were so many things that could've been better.

But.
Miyagi didn’t see it that way.

I give Miyagi the platypus lying on the floor. Then, I embrace her with the tissue cover still in her arms.

“Sendai-san, it's so hot.”
“Bear with it.”

I know I've been feeling too much regret.

I knew I had to detach my feelings from her reddened feet for Miyagi's sake, to not burden her. Yet, Miyagi has pulled me out from the mire of my regret, despite my inability to do so.

Today, Miyagi is once again kind, painting over my regretful heart with pure white.

"...Why are you doing this?"
"Because you're cute, Miyagi."
"I'm not cute."

A low voice reaches me as I pull away to look at Miyagi, her face showing a sulky expression. Undeterred, I kiss her cheek.

"You don't need to do that, just let go."
"I'll let go in five more minutes."
"That's too long."
"It's short, really. By the way, if you don't go to the hospital tomorrow, what will you do instead?"
"Gaming. I'll completely crush you, Sendai-san."
"...Can't it be something else?"
"It can't."

Miyagi firmly states as she wriggles out of my embrace and shoves the platypus at me.

Chapter 125

Sendai-san Doesn't Belong To Everybody (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 361

Even the day after the festival, my feet were still sore.

But I managed to utterly defeat Sendai-san in the game. I even played through her incessant "one more round" requests, making it a pretty good day overall.

Today, however, doesn't seem like it will be as pleasant.

"Shiori-chan, you look depressed. University starts this month, do you want your vacation to be extended a little longer?"

Mio-san, who was supposed to be working part-time, abandons her work and speaks in a light voice.

"Shiori, you're against extending the summer vacation, aren't you?"

After hearing Mio-san's cheerful words, Maika's bright voice can be heard from across the table.

"Huh? Do you want university to start earlier, Shiori-chan?"

"Not really..."

"I'd actually prefer a longer summer break," Sendai-san says seriously, sipping her café au lait while seated next to me.

Less than two weeks remain until the end of summer break.

Though I had no plans for these remaining days, plans have changed, and today is turning into anything but a lazy day.

The instigator is the devilish message we received in the group

"Strange Birds," created by Mio-san.

"Come visit me at the café where I'm working," Mio-san's message read. Maika responded with an enthusiastic "I'll come," involuntarily dragging both Sendai-san and me along to gather at the café. Meeting individually one-on-one might be fine, but when four of us gather, nothing good ever seems to happen.

"Even if the break was extended, you wouldn't hang out with me, right?" Mio-san, who stands beside the table, pretends to wipe a tear, glancing at Sendai-san.

"That's not necessarily true."

"You say that, but I feel a certain implication on the 'not necessarily' part. It's heartbreaking!"

"You're not really that hurt, though," I point out.

Mio-san still avoids returning to work, replying lightly, "True, but... Oh, by the way, Happy Birthday, Hazuki. I hadn't said it directly." Maika follows, adding a bright "Happy Birthday."

"Thank you, both," Sendai-san replies softly.

"Is that necklace a birthday present from someone?" Mio-san grins, pointing at Sendai-san's necklace.

Of course, it's the necklace I gave her, and Sendai-san wears it openly with a four-leaf clover for everyone to see.

The café isn't particularly crowded, but I think Mio-san should get back to work soon. Being late afternoon, most patrons are regulars who don't mind her absence. There's a tranquil atmosphere in the air.

"Something like that," Sendai-san responds with a refreshingly honest smile, pulling gently on the chain of her necklace.

I fixate on her T-shirt.

The necklace wasn't a birthday present.

Sendai-san adheres to my request to "wear it always, wherever you

go," but she's lying about its origin.

But I would be in trouble if she told the truth and said it wasn't for any special day, as it would fuel Maika and Mio-san's curiosity, leading to a lot of hassle.

"Who, who? I'm dying to know who gave Sendai-san a necklace," Maika's voice rings with an almost tangible excitement, making me want to bury my head in my hands. Amidst this, I hear Sendai-san say "Miyagi," and my eyes instinctively meet hers.

Her brightest smile of the day greets me.

I want to glare at her, but I can't do that here.

"Wait, it was Shiori who gave it to you?"

"Yes," Sendai-san answers immediately, with Maika's eyes now fixated on me.

"Shiori, giving jewelry as a birthday present, huh? That's unexpected. But it's cute, you know? It feels like something nice will happen."

Maika shifts her gaze from me to Sendai-san's neckline, flashing a smile. "Why a four-leaf clover?" she asks.

"Why, you ask... It's because it's cute."

The reason for choosing a four-leaf clover is clear to us, but it's a secret only Sendai-san and I need to know—nothing to be aired in public.

Naturally, I stick to the innocuous response; there's nothing strange about it. And yet, there's a heaviness in my chest.

"Miyagi, you have a thing for cute stuff."

Hearing Sendai-san's voice, I respond, "Not particularly."

"But you like them quite a bit, Shiori," Maika comments almost teasingly.

The necklace is a symbol that Sendai-san is mine and serves to

visibly reinforce that she belongs to me.

It’s important—and a truth I want to voice without lying. Yet, I can't say it aloud, only resulting in more lies.

It feels terrible.

I take a sip of iced tea.

The knot in my chest doesn’t fade.

I take another sip.

It doesn't melt away like ice; my hand wants to caress the four-leaf clover. I capture my right hand with my left, gripping tightly.

"Shiori-chan likes things like this, huh," Mio-san comments lightly, reaching toward the four-leaf clover on Sendai-san's chest.

I almost reach out, almost say something, but restrain myself.

Mio-san's hand inches closer to the four-leaf clover I so badly want to touch.

Five centimeters more.

That much, and the knot in my chest tightens further.

I press my right hand down harder and harder.

Just a little more.

Mio-san's hand nearly touches the four-leaf clover, but it never quite makes contact.

"Hazuki, what's this? I can't move my hand," exclaims Mio-san, startled, her hand pinned by Sendai-san’s to the table.

"It's a punishment for skipping work," replies Sendai-san.

"That's pretty strict. Well, I was just about to get back, so it's perfect timing."

"In that case, the punishment is over," Sendai-san releases Mio-san's

hand, adding, "Be sure to work diligently."

"I'll make up for the time I skipped... But first, one thing."

Mio-san clears her throat, continuing, "So, since Shiori-chan, who likes cute things, has a birthday coming up, I was thinking... How about we have a joint Hazuki and Shiori birthday party?"

In the course of exchanging messages within the group, Mio-san had asked about my birthday. I reluctantly shared it, having sensed this might happen. And now, unsurprisingly, it has.

I look at Mio-san, who is all smiles, and ponder how to refuse. But before I can come up with an answer, Sendai-san states firmly:

"That day, Miyagi and I already have plans."

"Wait, are you two planning to celebrate together?" Mio-san's curiosity piqued, and Sendai-san replies, "Yeah, something like that."

"Oh, that reminds me, you celebrated together last year too," Maika recalls, prompting Mio-san to jump in.

"Come on, let me join! You'd want to join too, right, Maika?"

"Well, I'd love to say 'let me join,' but I'm sure you two who live together want to celebrate alone... How about another day?"

"Yeah, that makes sense. But at some point, let us celebrate both your birthdays together," Mio-san insists, wearing a smile that radiates genuine friendliness as she looks at Sendai-san and me.

In this situation, saying "no" isn't an option.

There's only one answer, so I put on a smile and say, "Sure, let's get everyone together."

"It would be great if you could do that," Sendai-san says brightly, and Mio-san says "Alright then," heading back to her job.

The remaining three of us order some more cake and share stories of what happened over our summer break.

Stories about Sendai-san's job I didn't quite care to hear.

Maika's tales of her trip back home, which I eagerly listened to.

And the story of how I beat Sendai-san in a game.

As we exchange anecdotes about our summer, the drinks flow into our stomachs, and the cake vanishes as well. Sendai-san starts recounting our trip to the festival, and Maika's eyes light up.

"Did you both wear yukatas?"

"We did. Miyagi looked great in hers."

"I didn’t."

I quickly deny Sendai-san's comment, and Maika chuckles softly.

"I wanted to go to the festival too—I wanted to see you in a yukata, Shiori. Do you have any photos, Sendai-san?"

"I do, but if I show them without permission, I’d probably be resented forever."

"I wouldn't hold a grudge."

Even as I downplay it, Sendai-san teasingly asks, "So, it’s okay to show them?" I lightly push her shoulder.

"Of course not."

"You guys are as close as ever. Any fun stories from the festival?"

Maika giggles and leans in closer.

"I hadn’t had cotton candy in ages, but it tasted really good."

Among everything we ate that day, the cotton candy stood out the most to me. It's not something I usually indulge in, but it brings back a fluffy, sweet nostalgia from childhood festivals.

"I want some cotton candy—it’s so festive! Next year, we should all go to the festival together in yukatas."

Maika says excitedly, alternating her gaze between Sendai-san and

me.

Her eyes are filled with hope, making it hard to refuse. It's not something you'd say to a dear friend. Still, the idea of Sendai-san joining us bothers me, and the thought of wearing a yukata cannot be brushed aside.

"I won’t wear one."

I can’t say I don’t want us to go with Sendai-san, so I firmly reject the only part I can.

I won’t wear a yukata again.

The last time was an exception.

"You should wear one. Shiori, I think you'd look great," Maika suggests encouragingly.

"Miyagi, you really did look great in it. Why not wear it again?" Sendai-san concurs, smiling at me.

At times like these, Sendai-san really gets under my skin, always saying things that make me uneasy.

"I want to see Shiori in a yukata too. It would make for a great memory of our college days if we all went to a festival together."

Hearing Maika's voice, Sendai-san irresponsibly says, "It sounds fun for everyone to wear a yukata," fiddling with her necklace, leaving me with no choice but to relent and say something I’d rather not.

"...Maybe, if I remember."

"Promise!" Maika says with satisfaction, as Sendai-san squeezes the four-leaf clover pendant next to me.

Sendai-san Doesn't Belong To Everybody (II)

Part 362

As soon as I step into the shared space, Sendai-san grabs my arm.

"What are you planning to do now, Miyagi?" she asks softly.

"I'm going back to my room."

"Then, can I come to your room?"

"What will you say if I say no?"

"I'll keep asking until you say yes."

"That makes saying no pointless."

"It does have a point. If you say absolutely not, I won't come."

Does she think I won't refuse her? Sendai-san says this with a smile and asks again if she can come to my room. It's little things like this about her that really get on my nerves.

We just got back from the cafe where Mio-san invited us, and I'm exhausted. Sendai-san's antics today have been over the top, so I have every right to tell her no. I could kick her in the shin and just head back to my room—case closed.

"Miyagi," she murmurs, brushing her fingers against the four-leaf clover necklace.

I grip her hand tightly, meeting her eyes.

"That hurts," she complains.

"It'll hurt more," I retort, gripping her hand harder and harder. A frown appears on her forehead, but she no longer complains about the pain.

Leaning her forehead against mine, she asks, "Can I kiss you?" in her usual ridiculous manner. So, I kick her shin.

"...You're making hamburg steak for dinner tomorrow, Sendai-san."

I've already eaten at the cafe, so there's no need to prepare dinner tonight. Hence, Sendai-san will be responsible for tomorrow's meal.

"Hamburg steak tomorrow?" she asks.

"If you don't want to, then forget it."

"It's fine. I'll do it."

Her soft voice brushes against my ear as her lips lightly touch the charm on my earring, sealing our little promise for tomorrow's dinner.

"Is barley tea alright for you, Miyagi? Once I put down my bag, I'll bring some tea to your room."

I hadn't explicitly said she couldn't come to my room, but I never said she could either. Yet, she seems intent on coming all the same. It's not worth arguing about, so I simply respond, "I'll have soda," and head back to my room.

I set my bag down and sit on the bed. Meeting Maika and Mio-san at the cafe wasn't entirely unenjoyable, but if they ask me to meet up again tomorrow, I'm tired enough to decline.

It wasn't interesting to see Sendai-san smiling along with others, and it also wasn't interesting to just silently listen to the words she said to fit in with everyone.

Sigh.

I exhale deeply and tug at my hair. There's so much I want to say to Sendai-san about today, but I don't even know where to start.

I sigh again, absentmindedly moving my feet, pondering the most pressing issue. Maika and Mio-san come to mind.

There were plenty of subjects they brought up today that I wish had

been left unsaid.

Pressing my feet against the floor, I exhale once more when a knock sounds at the door, and Sendai-san's voice follows.

"Miyagi, may I come in?"

"Just a sec; I'll open it."

I stand up from the bed and open the door.

Holding glasses in each hand, Sendai-san comes in saying, "Thank you," and places the glasses on the table. As I sit in front of the soda, Sendai-san naturally sits beside me and takes a sip of her tea.

"Are you not tired?"

Her gentle voice reaches me. I take a sip of soda and gaze at her chest.

"Of course I'm tired. But more importantly, why did you tell them it was a birthday present from me?"

"What do you mean by 'it'?"

Feigning ignorance, she asks with exaggerated innocence, prompting me to put my glass down and tug at the four-leaf clover pendant.

"This."

"The necklace?"

"Yeah."

"Would it have been better to tell the truth?"

"...No, it wouldn't."

"I thought you would say that, which is why I said it was a birthday present."

"There was no need to say that, though. You could have just chosen not to say who it was from."

I release the four-leaf clover and glare at Sendai-san.

"Would you have preferred that I said it was from a friend?"

Such a lie would be intolerable. I press my hand against Sendai-san's chest, firmly securing the necklace.

"This necklace still signifies that you belong to me, doesn't it?"

"I will never forget. That's why I wanted to say it was from you, Miyagi. If I had to say anything, it had to be that it was a birthday gift. I don't want anyone else to misunderstand."

Her words resonate with me through the palm of my hand.

Her words align with my feelings.

There's no way what I gifted could be mistaken as something from someone else.

There are things one wants to hide with truth rather than the lies they wish they didn't have to tell. Sendai-san shows me how to differentiate between what should be protected by truth and what should be shielded by lies.

"Hey, Miyagi. How did you feel when I said the necklace was from you?"

Sendai-san secures my hand.

Our hands are intertwined, the four-leaved clover pressed close to me.

"Why do you even want to know?"

"I simply want to know your feelings."

"Feelings...?"

Her intent is unclear, and I lower my voice. I try to withdraw my hand from the necklace, but she clasps it even tighter.

We are incredibly close now.

The mark that belongs to me, the body heat that belongs to me, is conveyed without any lies, and it's suffocating. But as our hands remain entwined, I can't escape contemplating.

Earlier, Maika expressed curiosity about who gifted Sendai-san the necklace and, smoothly, Sendai-san answered, "Miyagi."

Calling it a birthday present was a lie, but there was truth in the word "Miyagi."

Back then, I—

"Did it bother you, or did it upset you?—or perhaps, were you happy?"

Sendai-san breathes calmly, asking me, "Which was it?" while gripping my hand around the necklace.

Looking up, Sendai-san meets my gaze, and I draw closer to her with my lips.

Instead of conveying the mixed feelings from truth wrapped in lies, I long for a kiss.

Barely brushing against her lips, I bite her neck.

My lips trail along the chain to the four-leaf clover, where I leave a kiss.

"...Does this mean you don't want to say?"

A soft voice reaches me, and I kiss Sendai-san again.

Over and over.

Repeated kisses that merely touch.

"Miyagi, that's unfair."

I don't quite understand what she finds unfair, but in between kisses, Sendai-san mutters under her breath before pressing her lips more firmly against mine. Her warm, wet tongue slips inside, blending our body heat together. Without resisting, I intertwine my tongue with hers, and she hugs me so tightly that I can barely

breathe, our kiss deepening and deepening.

Running out of oxygen, I push against Sendai-san's shoulder.

Yet she still won't let me go. Only when I bite her tongue does she finally release both her hold and her lips.

"I never said you could kiss me this much," I protest.

"You were the one who started it, weren't you?" she counters.

"Still, kissing until I can't breathe? That's just stupid."

Grabbing the tail of the crocodile under the table, I swing its oversized mouth towards Sendai-san.

"Ouch."

"That doesn't hurt, does it? And anyway, what was that all about, Sendai-san?"

"What do you mean by 'that'?"

"...The birthday."

"The birthday? What about it?"

"We ended up deciding on a gathering for the four of us to celebrate our birthday, and now it looks like I'll have to wear a yukata again next year."

"The birthday isn't my fault. It was you who suggested we should all meet up, Miyagi."

It's true; when Mio-san proposed, "Let's celebrate both birthdays together sometime," I responded with, "Let's all get together."

But it was Sendai-san who set the stage for me to say something unnecessary.

"All because you said we already had plans for my birthday."

A celebration for Hazuki and Shiori's birthday—I had to suggest it after Sendai-san casually mentioned to Mio-san, "We already have

plans on Miyagi's birthday."

"I didn't want to make up some excuse about your birthday, so I had to tell the truth. We agreed last year to eat a whole cake and drink together for your birthday, right?"

Sendai-san holds my hand and leans against the bed. Her hand in mine is warm.

"Miyagi, let’s go somewhere together for your birthday."

Her gentle voice reaches me.

"We’re not going anywhere."

"Since we already went to the festival, I guess it's okay. But on the actual day, will you help with the cooking?"

"What? So I'm cooking again this year? I already helped with the dishes on your birthday too, and all I seem to do is cook."

"It's more fun cooking together, right? Also, can we sleep together tonight?"

Sendai-san cheekily sneaks in a question I almost miss.

"Why do I have to sleep with you, Sendai-san?"

"Because I feel like I haven't had enough time to feel like I'm yours."

"What does that even mean?"

"It’s just sleeping together, so it’s fine, right?"

"...Promise it on the earrings."

"Alright," she agrees.

Then she whispers, "We'll only sleep and talk," followed by a kiss on my earring.

Sendai-san Doesn't Belong To Everybody (III)

Part 363

I truly think Sendai-san is hopelessly stupid.

"Shall we take a bath together?"

She said it so refreshingly.

That suggestion came up when we decided to take a bath before going to bed and were about to choose who would go first with a game of rock-paper-scissors.

The discussion wasn't about going in together or not, it was about who would go first. Her remark was completely out of place. Despite having a beautiful face, Sendai-san constantly says the most unsuitable things for her appearance.

I watch the girl who continues fighting on TV.

I started watching this anime to kill time while Sendai-san was in the bath, but it turned out to be quite entertaining.

I exhale, thinking that it might have been nice to watch it together with Sendai-san. Up until now, the person I shared hobbies with was Maika, but now Sendai-san seems to have encroached on that territory.

I press the stop button to pause the girl's movement and turn off the TV.

I won the game of rock-paper-scissors and took a bath first. Sendai-san was supposed to go after, and she’s in the bathroom now.

I tug at my hair.

I took the time to properly dry it, yet Sendai-san still hasn’t come back.

Simply put, she's taking too long.

Not that a lot of time has passed, but it feels that way because Sendai-san isn't returning quickly. Wanting to complain about her delay makes it evident that I'm waiting for her.

"…I don't really need to stay up, do I."

I somehow ended up sharing a bed with Sendai-san, but I didn't promise to stay awake waiting for her to come back from the bath.

I lie on the bed.

I turn off the light and close my eyes.

Today has been exhausting for a number of reasons.

I wasn't particularly sleepy, but the darkness brings drowsiness, and I drift away from reality.

The events at the café faintly emerge and fade in my mind.

Dreams and reality mingling, Sendai-san's voice telling an annoying story about a necklace she doesn't have to mention reverberates in my head.

"Miyagi."

Someone calls me from afar.

"Miyagi."

I hear the sound of something being tapped.

"Miyagi, just. I'm coming in, okay?"

All I hear is the voice, without any warmth nearby.

"Miyagi."

I open my eyes and sit up.

Sure enough, Sendai-san isn't here.

"Miyagi, are you okay?"

I open my eyes and turn on the light, trying to think through my groggy state.

I’m on the bed, without Sendai-san.

She was supposed to be in the bath, but hearing her voice from outside the room means she's finished bathing.

"Miyagi, I'm coming in."

Her voice sounds like she could enter at any moment, yet Sendai-san, being polite, doesn't come in on her own.

I get out of bed and open the door.

"Sendai-san, you’re noisy."

I complain to Sendai-san, dressed in a T-shirt and sweatpants, and she returns a soft voice.

"I'm back."

Even without approaching, I can tell.

Sendai-san smells the same as I do.

Her hair is dry and smooth.

Freshly out of the bath, she smells good and looks beautiful.

"...Welcome back."

I add, "Come in," as I sit at the table. Sendai-san sits next to me as if it’s the natural thing to do and asks, "Were you sleeping?"

"I was awake."

"That's a lie. You sound like you were sleeping."

"I wasn't."

I hand the air conditioner remote to Sendai-san.

"What?"

"Set the temperature as you like."

The room temperature is just right for me, but it must feel a bit warm for her, just out of the bath.

Sendai-san tends to feel warm and prefers a different ideal temperature than I do.

"It's fine. I wouldn't want you catching a cold, Miyagi."

As she tries to return the remote control, I push her hand back without taking it.

"If it gets cold, I'll raise the temperature myself."

"Then I'll lower it myself if it gets warm."

"How about now?"

"It's fine as it is."

Sendai-san smiles softly, places the remote on the table, and adds, "Shall we sleep?"

"Weren't we going to chat?"

"We already talked a bit, and I'm sleepy too."

Sendai-san stands up and asks, "Miyagi, which side do you want to sleep on?"

"The wall side."

I answer briefly and lie down on the bed before she does.

She comes over to my side, trying to claim more space, mumbling about moving over. I push her shoulder aside, telling her the space is cramped.

"Miyagi, stingy. I'm turning off the light."

"Yeah."

As I respond, the room lights switch to a night light.

The world is enveloped in a faint glow.

I face towards Sendai-san.

She still smells nice.

I reach out and touch her hair.

It’s lighter in color than mine, pleasant to touch, and feels good just having my fingers in it.

"Miyagi, your bed is comfortable."

"It’s an ordinary bed."

"I think it’s a bed that makes you want to sleep in it every day."

Sendai-san’s hand reaches out, touching my side.

I can see her face.

In the dim room, our eyes meet.

Her hand tries to slip inside my T-shirt, so I kick her leg.

"Ow. Stop doing that without saying anything."

"I'll kick you."

"Just because you say it doesn’t mean it’s okay."

"You were the one who said not to do things silently, Sendai-san. If you want to touch, touch your own stomach."

I grab Sendai-san’s hand and push it against her own stomach.

"It’s no fun touching my stomach when you’re right next to me, Miyagi."

She says this seriously and rolls over onto her back.

After gazing at her profile in the faint light, I slowly close my eyes.

"Miyagi, are you asleep?"

"Of course I'm not sleeping."

I closed my eyes, but it hasn't even been ten seconds.

No way I could sleep that quickly.

"I see. What kind of drink do you want for your birthday?"

The person who suggested going to sleep is now interrupting the process.

The same person who previously claimed to be sleepy doesn't seem to fit this description anymore.

"Sendai-san, you said the chat was over."

I complain and open my eyes, only to find Sendai-san, previously in profile, now facing me.

"I never said 'over,' and answering one question isn't much."

Judging from her voice, she's not likely to fall asleep soon. Not answering isn't an option; if I don't, she'll just keep asking the same thing.

"...As long as Sendai-san doesn't lose her composure, anything is fine."

"Don't add unnecessary comments."

"That's an important comment."

"I won't drink so much as to lose my senses; don't worry."

"I can't trust that."

Typically, the ones who assure others not to worry are often the least reliable.

"Don’t worry."

Once again, Sendai-san utters words I find hard to trust and continues speaking.

"I hate the thought of losing my memories if I drink too much."

"Is that something you don't want?"

"No one willingly wants to lose their memory, right?"

Sendai-san states this as if it’s common sense.

"Even if you don't want to, aren't there times when you do forget?"

"Well, it seems like Mio has had a few incidents."

She brings up a familiar example, adding the detail, "She tends to be hungover sometimes."

"I bet Mio-san gets noisy when she drinks."

"True. Out of our group, Utsunomiya seems like she wouldn't change much. She'd probably smile and drink a lot."

Hearing "Utsunomiya" unexpectedly from Sendai-san makes my ears perk up.

What she said about Mio-san is factual, while her guess about Maika is speculative.

Reflecting on past events is inevitable, I suppose. But discussing what it would be like to drink with Maika when there aren't even any plans to do so doesn't sit well with me.

My hand instinctively reaches towards Sendai-san's chest.

I trace her collarbone and follow the chain of the necklace.

I almost touch the four-leaf clover but stop.

"Aren't you going to touch it?"

Sendai-san whispers softly.

"I'm not touching it."

"You almost did."

"I didn’t almost touch it."

If I touch it now, it might seem as though I'm jealous.

"…Maika won’t be able to drink until next year."

I turn my back to Sendai-san and close my eyes. Maika won't turn twenty for a while, so talk of alcohol is premature.

"I know."

With a flat voice, she tugs at my T-shirt.

When I don't turn around, Sendai-san's voice reaches me again.

"…Miyagi, kiss me."

"No."

"Miyagi."

"If you want to kiss, just do it. Why are you asking me for permission?"

"Because we promised just to sleep and talk."

"Then stick to that."

I curl up my back, and Sendai-san places her hand there.

"I'll keep the promise and sleep, just turn this way."

"No."

"…Shiori."

Her hand presses against me more firmly.

She didn't have permission to call me Shiori. I turn towards Sendai-san, ready to voice my complaint.

Chapter 126

Miyagi's Troubling Thoughts for Me (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 364

While I wished the holidays could last longer, having them go on forever would be problematic.

If summer vacation never ended, university wouldn't start, and without university starting, Miyagi's birthday wouldn't come.

So today was a much-anticipated day.

"What are you planning to do after this, Hazuki?"

Mio, who was sitting next to me, grabbed my arm tightly. I tried to gently pull my arm away, but Mio's grip didn't loosen.

Since I was just about to leave after our final class of the day, I couldn't shake off a sense of foreboding.

"Going home."

That was the only plan I had. Truthfully, unless I had to tutor, my schedule would always be the same after class ended—going straight home.

"Before that, though—before you head home."

"I don't have any plans before that. I intend to go straight home."

"Want to make a detour with me?"

Mio said with a bright smile.

"Hmm, I'd like to get home early today."

"It's more like you want to get home early 'as always,' isn't it?"

“If you already know, isn’t asking just unnecessary?”

“Just in case. But if you’re heading straight home, that’s fine too. Just give me five minutes to talk.”

While I was itching to go home as soon as possible, spending five minutes with Mio wouldn’t hurt.

Friends should be cherished, after all.

Miyagi thinks so too, and she makes sure I know. Plus, she’s told me to treat Mio well.

Even though I have certain feelings about Mio getting too close to Miyagi, I know that I should be proper friends with Mio, and so I ought to hear her out at least.

“Sure, what is it?”

Let it be an invitation to a mixer—I can easily turn that down. If it's about the café job, that’d be slightly more bothersome. I put on a smile and looked at Mio.

“It’s about the birthday party for Hazuki and Shiori. Why don’t the four of us go out for drinks?”

“Utsunomiya can’t drink yet.”

Mio’s unexpected proposal took a turn for the worse, and I expressed a justifiable reason to cut the conversation short.

“Oh, that’s right. Then how about coming to my place? We could invite Noto-senpai too.”

I know Mio means no harm. But her bad idea just got worse.

I detached her hand from my arm and set it on the desk.

Mio is one of those people who won’t frown if you turn down an invite, and she’s the type who'll treat you the same the next day without needing any appeasement. She’s assertive but can be categorized as a frank and pleasant person. Although sometimes a bit troublesome, spending time with her isn’t bad at all.

But that's only when it doesn't involve Miyagi. Right now, I'm in anything but a cheerful mood.

"If you'd like, why not come to my place instead? Miyagi will be there too."

I maintained my smile as I proposed a counteroffer.

"Is that okay?"

"Sure. Although, as you know, it's not very spacious, so four people would be the limit."

It's not ideal, and even now I feel like retracting the invitation, but I keep smiling at Mio.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

While I appreciate the thought of celebrating my birthday, the mention of a certain name inevitably brings a frown.

"Alright, that sounds good then. We should check with Shiori-chan and Maika-chan, and decide on a day."

"I'll ask Miyagi about her schedule."

She'll definitely be upset and throw a tantrum saying she doesn't want to. I understand those feelings, but she'll have to resign herself to it.

"Okay,"

Mio said lightly, almost as if she could blow me away with her voice, staring at me intently. It seems I am not yet free.

"There's one more thing. I want to give Shiori a birthday present, but I have no idea what she'd like. Could you tell me what she's into? I know she likes cute things from our last conversation, but I need more info."

I find myself at a loss with that question. I would also like to know what kind of things Miyagi likes and what she desires.

“Miyagi doesn’t talk much about things she wants.”

To steer the conversation away from likes, I say something trivial and touch the necklace Miyagi gave me.

A birthday present.

For Miyagi, I want to give something just as thoughtful as this necklace. Of course, voicing that would anger her, so I keep it to myself, yet the thought lingers.

Like Mio, I haven’t settled on a present either.

“I see. Sounds tough to decide what to give.”

Mio sighed deeply, wondering aloud what she should do. Then, as if recalling something, she stood up.

“It’s been over five minutes already, so I’ll let you go, Hazuki.”

With that, we both left the university together. After parting with her, I headed to the station.

Manga and games. Penguins and cats. Things that are cute.

I can list a few of her likes like this, but they don’t suit the present I want to give. It should be something Miyagi cherishes, something she keeps with her, constantly reminding her of me.

Unfortunately, I don’t know what that is.

Walking through the city, I observe the shops lining the streets. Maybe among them, there’s something Miyagi would love.

But I quickly dismiss that thought.

Finding something on a whim that Miyagi might like seems overwhelmingly difficult. Despite knowing her so well, there remain aspects of her that are a mystery to me.

I know the softness of her lips, the smoothness of her skin. The voice that only I have heard.

Without a doubt, I know Miyagi better than anyone else. Yet, I know

less about her than Utsunomiya.

Her closest friend, Utsunomiya, knows more about Miyagi's likes than I do. Anything she doesn't know, she can readily find out from Miyagi.

"…I should hurry home."

I whisper softly, picking up the pace.

Taking the train, I head home.

Miyagi is likely not back yet, but I want to return to the home where she'll eventually be. On days like today, I long to share a kiss with her.

On the night we slept together, we kissed. She broke the promise of only talking or sleeping, initiated it herself, and kissed me multiple times.

It's infuriating.

Miyagi, who whimsically maintains a rational distance, is sometimes gentle, and every moment spent together produces deeper feelings for her.

To such a person, I need to give a present.

Like the necklace I received from her, it should be special, filled with my affection, and bring her joy. Yet I suspect no gift could ever truly match the necklace I received.

Still, not giving anything isn't an option.

I want to give her something, though I don't know what it'll be.

There's an overwhelming abundance of things in the world that could be given as gifts. Choosing a single item from infinitely many is quite challenging.

Suppressing the urge to sigh, I swallow it back.

In this moment of considering a gift for Miyagi, there's no place for a sigh.

Her birthday is fast approaching. There is no more time.

As I swayed gently with the motion of the train, I couldn't help but continuously ponder over the undecided birthday present.

Miyagi's Troubling Thoughts for Me (II)

Part 365

The front door creaks open.

After parting ways with Mio, even though I headed straight home without any detours, there's already a pair of shoes by the entrance. I hurry to the shared space. I didn't expect to find Miyagi there, pouring soda into a glass, so I call out to her.

"You're back early, aren't you?"

"It's you, Sendai-san, who's late."

Her voice carries a hint of displeasure.

"Miyagi, you haven't had dinner yet, right?"

"I'm drinking soda in my room."

"Mind if I come to your room after I drop off my stuff? There's something I want to talk about."

"...What's this talk about?"

Returning an answer to her suspicious tone with "I'll tell you in your room," Miyagi stashes the plastic bottle back in the fridge and, in a somewhat cold voice, says:

"Do as you please."

"Thanks."

I say with a smile, and she disappears into her room with the glass of soda. I head to my room to put away my belongings. Then, I pour barley tea into a glass and knock on Miyagi's door with it in hand.

"Come in."

Miyagi instructs curtly, without showing herself, so I enter. I place

the barley tea on the table and sit next to Miyagi.

"I was about to head home, but then Mio caught me," I explain.

Though it's not information I necessarily need to share, considering the topic I'm about to discuss, it’s better to say it upfront.

"Why even mention that?"

She responds with words that are sharp and pricky, piercing into me. I answer amiably, despite her chilly demeanor.

"You said I was late a moment ago, so I thought I should explain why."

"There's no real connection since we didn't set any plans, so explaining why you're late is just weird."

"It’s not weird. What I’m about to talk about involves Mio."

If I could, I'd prefer to chat about something more fun than what I know will displease Miyagi.

However, this matter can't be postponed. If I did, it would only become a bigger hassle than it is now.

"Mio mentioned having a birthday party for both of us. The date isn't set yet, but it's going to be held here."

"...Eh?"

"I'm sorry."

I apologize, joining my hands together, but Miyagi remains motionless, as if she's turned to stone.

"Mio suggested inviting Noto-senpai and having it at her place, which would complicate things for you, right?"

Though I ask, I'm not expecting a reply, nor do I want her to speak.

If I let her speak now, she’d probably just complain, so I rapidly deliver the crucial information.

"So, I've arranged for Mio and Utsunomiya to come over to our place. I've set a limit, saying that four is the maximum for a gathering here, so no more members will be added, which I think is better than having a party with five people."

Once I finish talking, silence ensues. Miyagi says nothing.

Yet, her hand slowly moves to grab the crocodile tissue cover. She drags it over and lifts it up, but she doesn't direct it at me.

The crocodile with tissues sprouting from its back finds its place in Miyagi's embrace.

I look at her face. There are faint wrinkles on her brow, but she doesn't seem angry, as she doesn't glare at me.

"...Miyagi?"

I softly call her name, and she grips the crocodile's paw and addresses me, "Sendai-san."

"What?"

"Listen to one thing I say. We have that kind of promise, right?"

"What promise are you talking about?"

Involuntarily, I ask back.

I've made many promises with Miyagi, but none that say I have to listen to her in this kind of situation.

However, Miyagi states it as if it's only natural.

"Didn't we agree that on days you meet Mio-san, you'd listen to what I say?"

"That's only when I go out with Mio."

Indeed, there's a standing promise that "on days I meet Mio, I'll listen to what Miyagi says."

But that shouldn't apply to meeting at university. If it did, I'd have to listen to her every day since we regularly meet there.

"Yes, but today's different."

Saying something unreasonable, Miyagi looks at me with dissatisfaction.

"What should I do?"

At times like this, I don't have the words to refuse. No matter how irrational or off-the-mark, I can only accept what Miyagi says, and I myself desire that too.

Miyagi places the crocodile on the floor, reaches out to me without hesitation, and calls, "Hazuki."

Grabbing my blouse, she slowly instructs me on what I should do.

"Take this off. Then I'll forgive you for inviting Maika and Mio here on your own."

Under the room's lighting, Miyagi meets my eyes as though testing my embarrassment.

The order isn't difficult. I've done it countless times before. I undressed in front of Miyagi when wearing a yukata too.

Still, for no reason, a sense of hesitation grips me.

"Hazuki."

She calls me softly, yet clearly. Her hand slips away from my blouse as if urging me to do it myself.

"Miyagi, why don't you do it too?"

"I'm not undressing. You're the one who has to undress, Sendai-san."

She doesn't address me as Hazuki, making it clear that she's displeased.

I only voiced a wish I didn't expect to be granted, so I quietly comply with Miyagi's words.

One, two, three.

I undo the buttons in order, starting from the top.

"Miyagi, you're really quite the pervert, aren't you?"

As her gaze follows my fingertips, I stop taking off the blouse and comment, only to receive an immediate retort, "Not nearly as much as you, Sendai-san."

"You're more of a pervert, Miyagi."

"Just shut up and take it off."

When I took off my blouse as instructed, my camisole was pulled and another thing I had to remove was added.

"This too."

"That's in poor taste."

"But that means Sendai-san's naked body is in poor taste."

"Let me correct that. Miyagi wants to see other people naked without taking off her own clothes, so your taste is bad."

It's not that I don't feel shame.

So things that don't need to be said come out of my mouth.

But doing things like this won't change the outcome.

"Are you going to take it off?"

"I'll take it off."

I say quietly and take off my camisole.

I still have something covering my upper body, but I'm not told to take it off.

Miyagi's fingertips graze above the bra strap.

She draws closer and nibbles at my shoulder. There's no pain.

A soft tongue traces over my skin.

Her lips press strongly just below my collarbone, a place normally hidden by clothing.

After a slight pain, her lips detach.

Probably, a mark remains.

I touch the unseen mark with my fingers.

Despite wearing a necklace, I wish for more marks like this.

"Miyagi."

I clutch her arm and pull her closer. Miyagi leaves another mark, pressing on the red trace with her fingertip.

"Hazuki."

Being called quietly feels comforting. Instead of calling her Shiori, I ask, "What is it?" as Miyagi touches the four-leaf clover at my chest and speaks.

"On my birthday, wear something nice."

"Eh?"

Miyagi is truly unpredictable, and I never know what she'll say next. I never expected her to mention what I should wear on her birthday right after making me take off my clothes.

"Are we going somewhere?"

I ask, still trying to make sense of it.

"We're not going anywhere. I just want you to wear something nice."

"What kind of outfit do you want me to wear?"

I have no idea what she means, but I don't intend to refuse. If there's something Miyagi wishes for, I want to fulfill it.

"Anything is fine. Also, you're in charge of the alcohol, Sendai-san."

Having said that, Miyagi picks up the blouse and camisole from the floor and hands them back to me.

Apparently, I'm allowed to get dressed again. I put on the blouse and camisole that she returned to me.

"Will something sweet be okay for the alcohol, Miyagi?"

"Anything's fine."

Miyagi's "anything" rarely means just anything.

A round cake for a birthday present. And then, the alcohol. There are plenty of things to put together.

I lean in closer to Miyagi’s ear. I press a kiss to her plumeria earrings and whisper, "I'll make sure to prepare something you'll like, Miyagi."

Miyagi's Troubling Thoughts for Me (III)

Part 366

Think, think, think.

I've been pondering for days, preparing everything that needed to be done by today.

However, there's one thing I can't seem to reach a conclusion on from this ongoing mental conference.

—What should I wear today?

Ever since Miyagi told me to "wear something nice" for her birthday, I've been thinking about it, but since she'd never asked such a thing before, even on the day itself, I have no clue what "wear something nice" means.

I want to wear clothes that Miyagi would like, but not knowing what that is, I'm sitting on the bed, clothes spread out around me, clutching my head in frustration.

Today, I'm not considering my own preferences.

All I'm thinking about is what Miyagi would like.

And that's why I've been agonizing over it.

I understand that it's not simply about wearing revealing clothes. If Miyagi wanted to see my body, she'd just ask me to take off my clothes.

Since she mentioned "wear something nice" even when I'm not wearing anything, it likely doesn't mean clothes with less fabric, and I don't really want to wear such clothing either.

Therefore, I have no idea what Miyagi means by "wear something nice." She has never made such a request before.

"Maybe something different from what I usually wear?"

I glanced at the dresses laid out on my bed.

If she wanted me to wear my usual clothes, she'd probably say so more specifically. Therefore, I figure she might be happy if I wore a dress I rarely put on since we started living together.

The problem is, there are only two dresses on the bed suitable for this season. Moreover, they feel a bit too fancy for just wearing around the house.

What should I do?

I press my temples with my fingers, then hold up a dress in a lighter blue shade than the earrings I received from Miyagi against my body.

I look at myself in the mirror, but perhaps because of how infrequently I wear such clothes, I'm unsure if it looks good. More accurately, I lack confidence, but I doubt anything else would look better, so I decide on this dress.

I prepared the drinks yesterday.

I bought the cake after lunch.

Now, I need to prepare dinner.

It's still too early to change, so I put the dress away for now and leave the room. Although it's a day off and I have plenty of time, it's not infinite.

I walk to Miyagi's door and knock twice. She appears almost immediately and asks, "Cooking?"

"Yeah, cooking. I'm starting now, so can you help?"

"Are you really making potato salad, Sendai-san?"

"I am. And scallop carpaccio."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just buy both?"

"Yes, but I promised to make them, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but..."

She sounds disgruntled, yet I have no intention of changing my plans. I've already made concessions by buying the fried chicken and desserts, so Miyagi should compromise too.

"Even if it's troublesome, it'll be fun once we start."

"...What should I do?"

Reluctantly, Miyagi exits her room and looks at me.

"Peel the potatoes."

When I say this with a smile, she gives me a distinctly annoyed look.

No matter her expression, I have no intention of altering my plans.

We both stand in the kitchen.

I hand Miyagi a peeler and some potatoes, leaving her to peel them.

I take a knife to the peeled potatoes, cutting them into chunks and tossing them into a pot.

The potatoes are boiled starting from cold water and mashed with a wooden spoon.

While I slice the cucumber and ham, Miyagi boils the eggs.

"Potato salad takes a few seconds to eat but ages to make."

Miyagi comments as she looks at my hands, evidently bored with supervising the eggs.

"Isn't that true for everything?"

"True, but potato salad isn't even the main dish, and it's such a pain to make."

"So, if it were the main dish, you'd stop complaining no matter how annoying it is to make?"

"...Not really."

Miyagi apparently wants to complain about difficult dishes, even if they're the main course.

But I know this about her.

Miyagi always finds cooking bothersome, no matter how simple, and never forgets to voice her complaints.

"The boiled eggs are done."

Miyagi mentions gruffly, and I cool the eggs in running water.

"So, Miyagi, don't you want to dress cutely today?"

I ask something unrelated to the potatoes or boiled eggs.

"No."

She replies curtly, and I respond with an "Alright."

Miyagi is the star today, so I should respect her opinions.

It's important she has fun wearing what she likes.

Still, there's this idea that she might want to dress cutely today that I can't quite dismiss.

"Miyagi, could you get the mayonnaise and whole-grain mustard?"

"I'll grab them."

Miyagi heads to the refrigerator, and I peel, then coarsely chop, the cooled boiled eggs. I mix them into a bowl with the potatoes, cucumber, and ham, seasoning it with the mayonnaise and whole-grain mustard that Miyagi brought, as well as salt and pepper.

It turns out surprisingly tasty.

"Miyagi, want to try it?"

I scoop some potato salad with a spoon and offer it to her, but she doesn't open her mouth.

"Miyagi."

Without saying "ah," I gently press the spoon to her lips, prompting a grumbled response.

"I'll eat by myself, give me the spoon."

"Come on, just open your mouth."

"No. I'll do it myself."

Miyagi takes the spoon from me and eats the potato salad.

"Well? Is it good?"

"It's good."

She says softly, looking at me.

"…Are you staying dressed like this today, Sendai-san?"

Miyagi asks, not quietly, but not loudly either.

"Who knows."

I smile as I answer, and she seems ready to say something but stops.

I wanted her to request "wear something nice" again, but she apparently won't.

Miyagi is as stingy as ever; it's one thing I'm certain will never change about her.

I brush my fingers against the plumeria earring on Miyagi's ear.

"Don't worry. I'll keep my promise."

"You could've just said that from the start. Stop being mean."

Though I didn't intend to be mean, I apologize earnestly and place the potato salad in the fridge.

"So, Miyagi, shall we make the scallop carpaccio?"

"It's a bother."

Miyagi never fails to meet my expectations.

"It’s easy."

Scallop carpaccio isn't that troublesome to make, so I'm telling the truth.

I ask Miyagi to prepare the plates while I slice the tomatoes and scallops. Once cut, I arrange them on the plates and place them in the refrigerator.

Carpaccio comes together simply with a sprinkle of salt and pepper, and a drizzle of lemon juice and olive oil, but I'll leave that for later. Warming up the fried chicken is also something I'll do afterwards.

Because today, there's still more to be done.

"Alright, let's head back to our rooms and meet here at seven," I tell Miyagi, giving a small kiss to her earring.

"What's with meeting at seven? There's quite a bit of time left. Besides, there's no need to go back to my room. I'll just stay here, so hurry up and get changed, Sendai-san."

"Meeting at a set time makes it feel more like an event, don’t you think?"

If I wanted to be efficient, I could have Miyagi stay right here and just return as soon as I’m done changing. But for a special day like a birthday, that feels too mundane.

"...I suppose."

"Alright, then. Let's both wait in our rooms until seven."

"Sendai-san, you always do strange things, you know?"

"Doing something strange makes it more memorable, right? It's a birthday, so I want to do something different than usual."

"No need to make a big deal out of it."

Miyagi lightly steps on my foot and murmurs quietly.

Chapter 127

Sendai-san's Day (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 367

"...Sendai-san, are you going somewhere?"

We had no plans to go out today.

That's why this question seemed odd.

Yet, I couldn't help but ask because Sendai-san looked like she was dressed to go out.

I knew she would come to this place after changing, but I didn't expect to see her looking ready to leave.

The clock strikes seven.

I could only stand still in the shared space, fixated on Sendai-san.

"Miyagi, do you want to go somewhere?"

Sendai-san smiles, with a full face of makeup and a look I'm not accustomed to seeing.

"Not at all."

She knows, just as I do, that I'm not going anywhere now.

Our day is already planned.

I move closer to Sendai-san.

Reaching for her ear, I touch the blue earring.

We will share a whole cake on my birthday.

She promised me that last year.

"I'll always celebrate Miyagi's birthday," she said.

Her hand envelops my fingers as they connect with her earring.

A promise layered upon a promise, tickling the depths of my heart, rendering me speechless.

All I can do is continue to gaze at the different Sendai-san standing before me, distinct from the one I saw before seven o'clock.

The dress that Sendai-san is wearing can be considered formal attire. She hardly ever wears dresses, so it feels fresh.

That's why I feel a bit unsettled. Yet, her face isn't unfamiliar—it's one I often see—which leaves me clueless about what expression I should bear.

"So, Miyagi. Should I wear something nice again next year? Though I don't know if this is what you'd consider a nice outfit."

Her hand withdraws, and she lightly lifts the skirt of her dress to show it off to me.

"You look like you're ready to go somewhere."

As I mutter a response, Sendai-san furrows her brows slightly and asks uncertainly.

"Is it bad? This outfit."

"It's not bad... I think it suits you."

It's not something that needs saying, but her eyes, like a discarded puppy's, compel me to speak the words I hadn't intended to.

"I see. I'm glad."

Sendai-san softly says and greets me with a smile. "Hey, Miyagi. Did you wait?"

"What for?"

"For me. You were here before me."

"Not really, I just stepped out of my room."

"At least play along with the pretend outing. We're supposed to be meeting up, you know."

Truly, Sendai-san's thoughts can be peculiar.

Back in high school, she proposed something called "pretend friendship," and we went to see a movie together.

Time has passed since then, and we've become college students, but we still haven't become friends. We're not even roommates anymore.

Day by day, we're slowly changing, and we will continue to evolve.

"I wasn't waiting at all."

In truth, I waited for about five minutes.

But in moments like these, saying "I wasn't waiting" is the norm.

Though I don't know how we will change after partaking in this pretend outing, since Sendai-san dressed up so nicely, I should at least indulge her play for a little while.

"Good. I thought I kept you waiting."

An upbeat voice rings out, followed by, "Shall we go, then?"

"...Sendai-san, is this fun?"

"Isn't it fun, like we're going out? Shall we go to my room?"

Her cheerful voice returns, leaving me with no choice but to agree with "Sure."

Sendai-san grabs my hand.

With a firm grip, she leads me to her room.

Sendai-san picks up her smartphone from the table. After doing something with it, she places it on the bed before saying, "It won't

go off today."

"It's fine if it rings."

"It's not fine. Today's Miyagi's birthday."

There were times when Sendai-san would suddenly get called by work or by friends.

Last year, I worried that such things might break our promise of "eating a round cake together on my birthday."

Apparently, she remembered that.

"I'll prepare the food, so the birthday star should relax right there."

Sendai-san says this lightly and leaves the room.

I sit as instructed, waiting for the meal to be ready.

Soon enough, a potato salad that we made together and scallop carpaccio adorn the table. Along with that comes rice and warmed fried chicken, and Sendai-san takes her seat.

"Miyagi, don't eat too much. We still have cake later."

"I know that."

Sendai-san seasons the carpaccio of scallops with salt and pepper, finishing it with a drizzle of lemon juice and olive oil.

"Miyagi, happy birthday."

Her voice, the brightest its been today, reaches me.

"Thank you."

"We match now."

"Match? What do you mean?"

"Our ages. Both you and I are twenty now."

"There are many other twenty-year-olds too."

"True, but let's eat."

At her prompting, our voices overlap in saying "Let's eat."

What should I start with?

Without any real dilemma, I begin with the labor-intensive potato salad.

"Is it good?"

When asked, I answer, "It's good."

I don't know if having boiled eggs in potato salad is normal, nor have I ever given much thought to the ingredients of potato salad, but the combination of potatoes and boiled eggs seems harmonious. They elevate each other, and the potatoes taste better than usual, as do the boiled eggs.

The scallop carpaccio isn't bad either.

Though it's my first time eating it, the freshness propels my chopsticks onward.

Across from me, Sendai-san also eats the scallop carpaccio.

She can do anything.

She's skilled in cooking, so even though helping was a chore, everything on the table is delicious.

The alcohol is supposed to come with the cake, so I can’t vouch for its taste, but if she chose it, there’s no doubt it’ll taste fine.

What will Sendai-san be like after drinking?

Soon, I'll have my answer to what I’ve been somewhat curious about.

"What is it? Is the outfit actually weird?"

Sendai-san pauses her potato salad to look at me.

"It's not weird."

"Then why are you staring?"

I can't answer why.

My gaze simply drifts toward Sendai-san on its own.

It’s not my conscious choice.

"Is it wrong to look?"

"Of course not."

Sendai-san continues eating the potato salad as if it's the most natural thing.

The unfamiliar dress suits her wonderfully.

In fact, she looks great in anything and manages to look beautiful no matter what she wears.

"...Sendai-san, if you dress like that again..."

I say quietly before taking a bite of the fried chicken she bought. It's delicious, but not as good as the one she makes.

"I'll wear a dress again, so why don't we go out together next time?"

"I'm not going out."

I firmly decline while eating more potato salad.

On Sendai-san's birthday, I wore a yukata. Since I wasn't planning on wearing one but ended up doing so, I thought I had the right to receive something similar on my birthday.

So I decided that the something would be Sendai-san in a beautiful outfit. But because we set a meeting like this, today feels like a special day. And if we were to make plans to go out together, that day might feel special too.

"You're so stingy, Miyagi."

Even if she complains, my feelings won't change. Even if there comes a time when we go out together, today is not the day to make that promise.

"Well, since it's your birthday, I'll stop complaining now."

"Then just eat quietly."

"Since it's your birthday, shouldn't we talk a bit?"

"There's no need to talk just because it's my birthday."

Sendai-san tries to make birthdays into grand events, but I prefer them to be more subdued.

I feel more at ease when my birthday blends into the ordinary days. That way, it feels as though it's only natural for tomorrow with Sendai-san to come, just as it feels natural for her to be here on my birthday.

Next year, the year after that, and even beyond that.

I want to believe that Sendai-san will be there on my birthday.

"Alright, I'll stay quiet for when you blow out the candles on the cake."

Sendai-san says with a bright smile.

"...Are you planning something?"

"I'm saving up my talk points to release them later. This year, I'm going to sing."

"Sendai-san, you're really stupid, you know."

I don't need a song.

It creates too much of a birthday atmosphere.

So, I decide to talk with her.

Sendai-san's Day (II)

Part 368

We talk about university and friends.
Discuss things like being a tutor, even though it's not necessary.

We engage in conversations that aren't exclusive to a birthday, while polishing off the potato salad and carpaccio.

The birthdays with my family sealed in albums won't come back, but on the day I was born, someone is by my side.

That someone is Sendai-san, and she's laughing happily.

Such a birthday isn't bad.
I find myself enjoying it too.

After a good amount of time has passed, and the table is mostly cleared, Sendai-san smiles and says, "Shall we bring out the cake soon?"

"I bought number candles this year."

Her additional remark wasn't something I requested, so I voice my protest.

"We don't have to use those."
"But I bought them, so let's use them. You bought them for me on my birthday too, right? I won't sing and make it cheesy," she says softly, standing up and leaving the room, as if to avoid hearing my complaints.

What Sendai-san will bring next is a “round cake.”

To me, cakes hold more bad memories than good, but last year was a pleasant one, and it's here again this year.

With Sendai-san, there is no "round cake I couldn't finish alone" left in the fridge. I don’t need to worry about leftovers. I can just focus on the sweetness of the cream and the softness of the fluffy sponge.

"Sorry to keep you waiting,"

Sendai-san returns, setting a whole cake adorned with white cream and strawberries on the table.

A “2” and a “0” candle are nonchalantly placed, flames lit. The lights go out, and the numbers on the cake assert their presence excessively.

"Miyagi, happy birthday,"

True to her word, Sendai-san doesn’t sing.

"Thank you."
"Congratulations on turning twenty,"

She congratulates me again and prompts me to blow out the candles.

I don’t particularly like such “obvious” actions, but I don't want to ruin her gesture.

I take a small breath and blow out the candles.

Sendai-san says "Congratulations" again and turns the lights back on.

"I’ll bring a knife to cut the cake,"

She says brightly and leaves the room. Alone, I gaze at the round cake on the table.

I know eternity doesn’t exist.
I have always been afraid of losing things that have been around forever, and that fear remains.

Entrusting a part of one’s heart.

Believing is like that, the more you entrust, the deeper you can believe. But in turn, the deeper the wound when you're betrayed.

A heart that has been carved out will never return.

It's hard to create a new one to replace what's lost, and I hate the pain. So for me to believe is immensely difficult, but I yearn to make an exception.

"I warmed up the knife,"

Returning with a bright voice, Sendai-san places two plates on the table.

Then, she moves a chocolate message plate that reads "Happy Birthday" from the cake onto a dish and says, "Let's cut it," driving the knife decisively into its center, much like last year.

I glance at the cat chopstick rests on the edge of the table.

These cat chopstick rests were a gift to Sendai-san for her birthday last year. Two out of the five are in the shared space, and the remaining three reside in this room.

Sometimes one is on the chest or perched atop a platypus head, but today, they are all dutifully watching over my birthday from the edge of the table.

The ears of Sendai-san, who is cutting the cake, are what I received last year, and now they have blue earrings in them.

Today on top of last year.
Among things that I see, last year's presence quietly persists.

Whether I expect it or not, traces of last year still remain here.

"This one's yours, Miyagi,"

Sendai-san slices the cake into quarters, placing two on a plate before me, adorned with the message plate.

"Thank you."
"Don't you think I cut it more neatly than last year?"
"I don't think there's much of a difference."
"Miyagi, you're too harsh,"

She exaggerates a sigh, then looks at me with a smile, "Shall we eat?"

Voices overlap in a “Let’s eat” as we dig in.

Its shape doesn’t have the sharpness of a store-bought cake, yet it clearly has the triangular peak as I break it apart and take a bite.

The lightly sweetened cream melts on my tongue, blending with the tender sponge. The strawberries are a tad tart, making me want another bite of the cream. I break another triangle and munch contentedly.

It tastes so good I could eat endlessly.

"Sendai-san,"

I look at her, engrossed in eating.

"What is it?"

I want you to promise me.
Next year, and the year after, and the year after that.
I want a promise for my birthday.

Even though I'm not ready to completely trust her, the words are on the verge of coming out, but I swallow them instead.

"Nothing."

More good things than bad things would be preferable.
Yet too many good things makes me anxious.
A world too convenient shouldn't last long, making me worry when something bad might happen.

It's foolish to worry about things that haven't happened yet, and not good to have negative thoughts during good moments, but it’s not easy to break these habits.

"Miyagi, how's the cake? Is it good?"

Hearing Sendai-san’s gentle voice, I reply, "Yes, it's delicious."

"What kind of cake would you like next year?"
“…Any round cake is fine.”
"Alright. I'll think about what cake to get. Let's enjoy a delicious cake together again next year."

Sendai-san is kind today too.
She speaks of next year as if it's a given.
That's why I want to stay by her side.

"Alright, Miyagi. I'll get the drinks, and before we dig into the cake, let's have a toast,"
"We don't need to go through the trouble,"
"It's your first time drinking, so let's at least toast,"

She smiles and leaves the room, soon returning with alcohol and glasses, and announces with an excited voice, as if sharing a secret.

"This is an apple flavored alcoholic drink called cider. It's low in alcohol and easy to drink."

I look at the three bottles placed on the table.
Though they seem like slightly different types, there's no odd one out, as they're all apple-based.

"It's not beer?"
"Well, beer would have been alright, but I thought Miyagi might say no to beer. Plus, I'm not fond of carbonated drinks,"

Saying so, she adds, "You prefer carbonated, right?"

"I like carbonated, but is there a non-carbonated one?"
"There is. I plan to have the still type, the non-carbonated cider,"

Pulling one of the three bottles towards herself, Sendai-san asks, "I got both sweet and dry for carbonated, which one do you want?"

"Sweet."

In short order, Sendai-san fills two glasses with cider, and places the one brimming with tiny, effervescent bubbles in front of me.

"Pick up your glass for a toast," she insists without seeming to offer me any choice, holding her glass with a smile that leaves no room for dissent. Begrudgingly, I pick up my glass, upon which her bright voice fills the room.

"Miyagi, happy birthday," she says once more, adding, "Cheers," and leaving me no option but to join in, "Cheers."

"Now, Miyagi, take a sip," she urges, her eyes filled with expectation. I bring the glass to my lips, letting the liquid slip down to my stomach.

"How is it?" she inquires eagerly.
"It tastes like apple juice, but..." I trail off, something feels off.

The unmistakable taste of apples spreads across my tongue, but there's something unfamiliar mixed with it that I can't quite place. It's not necessarily unpleasant, but not compelling enough to declare it delicious without reservation.

"But what?" Sendai-san prompts, probably noticing my ambivalent expression. Yet, it's difficult to articulate my thoughts. As I remain silent, she takes a sip from her glass, looks at me, and takes another.

"It's good, just like apple juice. Here, Miyagi, try this," she says, handing me her glass to taste the non-bubbly cider.

It still tastes like apples.

Yet again, something other than apple lingers, catching at my senses. Whether it's carbonated or not, that isn't the issue.

"Is it good?"
"It feels like something weird is mixed into the apple juice," I respond.
"You think the weird thing might be alcohol?"
"I'm not sure, but probably."

It's a taste absent in plain apple juice.

Perhaps it's precisely this unfamiliar taste that signifies the drink as alcoholic, and I find it not as palatable as Sendai-san does.

However, it's not an unbearable taste that I can't drink at all.

"Sendai-san, is this all the alcohol you have? Didn't you mention buying quite a bit?"
"I did," she acknowledges.
"Do you plan on drinking it all?"
"I might drink it, or I might not, depending on how I feel," Sendai-san replies, taking another sip of the liquid that so closely resembles

apple juice.

Sendai-san's Day (III)

Part 369

"Sendai-san, is it normal to drink something like that down so eagerly?"

When we toasted, the cider in Sendai-san's glass was filled to a bit above the eight-tenths mark. However, now, the liquid in her glass is noticeably less than half.

"Why not? It's delicious. You should try some, too."

Sendai-san says with a lightness reminiscent of cotton candy.

"I will, but..."

I take a small sip from my glass. As expected, I can't bring myself to drink it without hesitation.

"Make sure you eat the cake, Sendai-san."

"Don't worry. I'll eat it all."

Saying this, Sendai-san takes a bite of her cake and smiles at me with a cheerful "Delicious." She continues eating bite after bite until she finishes one of the two pieces on her plate.

Sendai-san is always cheerful, but today she's in an especially good mood and keeps saying "delicious."

It's true—that meals shared with others are delicious, and meals shared with someone who enjoys eating are even more so.

This is a simple truth, undeniable, and one I only seem to realize when I'm with Sendai-san.

"You should eat some too, Miyagi."

Encouraged by the beaming Sendai-san, I bite into one of the two pieces of cake on my plate, the one missing a triangular corner. I

crunch down on the chocolate message plate, letting the celebratory words melt into me.

Everything is sweet and delicious.

I munch on the strawberry resting atop the other cake. Breaking apart the sponge, I let the white cream dissolve on my tongue.

I glance at Sendai-san to see her savoring her remaining cake.

Gradually, the triangular pieces that were once part of a round cake disappear into our stomachs.

"Think you can finish it all, Miyagi?"

After finishing the slices on her plate, Sendai-san looks at me. I nod while consuming the birthday symbol, to which she responds with a pleased, "The cake was delicious," and I echo, "It was delicious."

"Now, on to the main event of today."

Her voice resonates in my ears.

"The main event?"

"Your birthday present. It's nothing too grand, though."

Sendai-san takes another sip of her cider, retrieves a box from beneath the bed, and sits back down.

"Miyagi, happy twentieth birthday."

Despite having heard these words countless times today, I never tire of them. She hands me a box wrapped in a beautiful shade of blue.

"Thank you."

Last year, Sendai-san gave me her "ears." What she gives me now is a "box" that fits in my palm, leaving its contents a mystery.

It's rectangular. Not heavy. But it's lightweight.

I explicitly told her I'd prefer something other than a necklace for my birthday, so it's likely not a necklace inside this necklace-sized

box.

So, what could be inside?

"Can I open it?"

I ask in a small voice, and she responds clearly with, "You have to open it now."

Sendai-san isn't drinking at the moment. She watches me intently.

I drop my gaze to the box.

While I'm not well-versed enough in shops or brands to guess the contents from the wrapping paper, the blue paper encasing the box offers no clues either.

"Hurry and open it," she urges.

I peel back the blue paper slowly, careful not to tear it, and place the folded paper on the table. Opening the box gently, I look inside.

"It's cute... But, what is it?"

It's rectangular and made of leather.

Embossed on the leather is a dog's imprint, reminiscent of a Borzoi.

I said it was cute, but "stylish" is a more precise description.

"It's a key case. Check inside."

Removing it from the box, I undo the button on the rectangular case and find a key hook inside, allowing me to attach keys.

"Honestly, I wanted to surprise Miyagi with something grand, but that was hard to find," Sendai-san says somewhat sheepishly, adding, "so it ended up being something ordinary." Looking up, I see a concerned expression on her face, and I unconsciously grab onto her clothes. Yet, her hesitant voice continues.

"I wanted to give you something special, like you did for me."

Her hand grazes the four-leaf clover. Her fingers stroke the leaves

softly as she says in a quiet voice, "This truly made me happy," before returning her gaze to me.

Sendai-san doesn't understand. For a birthday, nothing "special" is needed.

A birthday like anyone else's.

Spending today with Sendai-san, I wish for such a commonplace birthday.

In the repetitiveness of daily life, an event that highlights only this day makes me afraid it will stand out and become detached.

"I know you seem confused unless I tell you every single time, but I'll tell you, there's no such thing as a present that I wouldn't be happy with."

I tug on Sendai-san's clothing.

"I see. Thank you."

"Isn't it strange for Sendai-san to be the one saying thanks?"

"Is it?"

"Yes, it is."

Upon my assertion, Sendai-san chuckles softly and suggests,

"Hey, Miyagi. Give me your key. I'll attach it for you."

"My key? I'll have to go back to my room to get it."

"Then please, go grab it."

"Right now?"

"Yes, right now."

Sendai coaxed me, and though it was my birthday and I was supposed to be the star of the day, I had to give in.
"Just wait a moment."

I quickly dash to my room, retrieve my key, and come back. Sitting beside Sendai-san, I hand over the key.

"Miyagi, we're not just roommates; we're people living in something important, right?"

"You're the one who said this place was important, Sendai-san."

"I did, but it means this place is important to you too, right?"

Sendai-san calmly says in a gentle voice, as she opens the key case.

"I live here too, after all."

"Great. You know, a key is what lets you into this home — into something important. Something that can protect that felt like it would be best for Miyagi's birthday gift."

The key I fetched is inserted into the key case.

"This key case will always protect your key, Miyagi, so hold onto it always."

She presses the key case into my hand.

"Even without being told, I'll always keep it."

I'm certain this is something Sendai-san wholeheartedly chose for me.

I've never had a key case before, but it's not bad. The key to something important is something that should be cherished without even thinking about it. Naturally, the thing that protects such an important item is also important itself, so I would never lose the key or the case.

"Thank you. Then Miyagi, I have a request. Do the same thing for me."

"The same thing?"

"Attach my key to this."

Upon saying this, Sendai-san produces a leather rectangle from her

pocket.

It looks identical to my key case, prompting me to ask, "Is this the same key case as mine?"

"It's the same, yet different. Look closely," she replies.

I take the key case from Sendai-san and gaze at the leather object.

"...A cat?" I observe.

While my key case has a dog imprint, the one she's given me bears what unmistakably looks like a cat.

"Yes, a cat. It's cute, isn't it?"

"But why does Sendai-san's have a cat, and mine have a dog? It should be the other way around."

Sendai-san reminds me of a Borzoi. When I mentioned that in the past, she compared me to a cat.

"It's not backwards. You referred to me as a dog, so I want you to hold on to the one with a dog."

"...Fine."

With a quiet response, she hands me a key. I attach it to the key case and return it to her.

"Thank you. I'll take good care of the cat."

She whispers near my ear, and kisses the plumeria earring without being asked.

Today, Sendai-san is being terribly self-indulgent. Although it's my birthday, she does whatever she pleases.

"Miyagi, promise me."

The soft whisper tingles in my eardrum. I push against her selfish behavior with a nudge to her stomach, and she responds with a whisper, "Miyagi."

I don't mind making a promise, but conceding to her continuous whims feels infuriating, prompting me to tease her blue earring with my teeth.

"Ouch."

"It's my ear, so I can do what I want with it."

I ease the pressure of my bite, then touch the tip of my tongue against it. Tracing my tongue along her ear, I give a gentle nibble.

When I grip her side, she challenges with a playful, "May I touch you too?" forcing me to release my lips from her ear.

"Aren't you going to drink?"

"Miyagi, you're so stingy."

"Today's not about that."

"So, when will it be about that, then?"

"Today's a drinking day for you, Sendai-san. Just drink up."

"Well, the most important part of today is done. Let's drink. I'll just put the key cases here for now."

With that, Sendai-san places both our key cases on the dresser. Then she picks up her glass, finishes the remaining liquid, and refills it with cider.

"Miyagi, you should drink too."

She nudges my shoulder, prompting me to gulp down the far-from-delicious liquid. As I finish my glass, more cider is poured.

"I'll bring another sweet one," she announces.

Before I can refuse, she steps out, and a new bottle is added to the table.

"Keep drinking," she encourages with bright words as she sips her glass.

"Wait, Sendai-san, are you really okay to drink more?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your face is red."

More accurately, her cheeks are flushed. While she seems relatively unchanged, her cheeks' hue is quite different from before she started drinking.

"Miyagi is still the same," she observes.

"Maybe you should stop drinking?"

"But I just started. Miyagi, join in," she insists in a merry voice, patting my shoulder.

She chuckles as she pours cider into my still-full glass.

"It might overflow," she says, the statement echoing in the room. No, it's not almost overflowing.

It already has.

I wipe the table and move the cider bottle away from her. My previous notion of her unchanged demeanor should be revised.

She's reached a peculiar level of cheeriness now.

"Miyagi, birthdays are wonderful."

Beaming widely, Sendai-san adds, "You should drink more."

"It's not that tasty to me."

"Drink, it's good!"

Without waiting for permission, she takes a sip from my glass.

"Hey, Sendai-san, are you alright?"

"What do you mean? It's delicious."

"But you're drinking the carbonated one."

The cider in my glass is her disliked carbonated kind. Moreover, she's somehow on her third glass, which has transitioned to the carbonated variety.

"Even carbonation can be tasty."

"Perhaps, but... maybe you should stop drinking."

I take her glass away, looking at her as she leans into me with a heavy "Hmm."

She's heavy. All her weight falls onto me.

"Are you really okay, Sendai-san?"

"I might not be."

"Eh?"

"I'm feeling kind of light and floaty."

"Hey, Sendai-san."

"The alcohol is good, though," she says, her voice starting to slur. As she leans against me, her body feels limp, and with a gentle nudge, she collapses onto the opposite side.

Sendai-san's Day (IV)

Part 370

"……Eh?"

She collapsed.

Sendai-san did.

Even though I just gave her a slight push.

"Hey, come on. Are you alright, Sendai-san? Are you feeling unwell?"

I kneel beside Sendai-san, who's sprawled flat on the floor, and shake her shoulder.

Her eyes are closed and won't open.

What should I do? Shaking her might not be good.

I stop moving my hands and look at her. But, not knowing what else to do, I just call her name again.

Calling her name probably won't do anything. But the only thing that definitely won't make things worse is to call out to her. I don't think that this safe action will improve the situation, but it's better than doing nothing.

"Sendai-san."

When I call her again, her eyes slowly open.

"Sorry."

She says faintly as she sits up.

"Are you alright?"

"I was just trying to surprise you, but I overdid it."

Her ridiculous explanation irritates me, but I'm relieved.

"I don't think it's a good idea to surprise people like that."

"Yeah, that was a bit too much."

She speaks in a weak, listless voice and leans against the bed.

Her eyes close again. Her face remains flushed—a stark contrast from her usual self.

Wondering why things turned out this way, my eyes wander to the table.

—Clearly, the contents of those bottles are to blame.

The cider tasted like a cousin to apple juice, but it's unmistakably alcohol. It makes sense that Sendai-san would show typical symptoms of someone who's been drinking.

"If you know it's not a good idea, then don't drink anymore."

"Why not?"

She looks at me with a puzzled expression.

"Why not? Because you're acting strange, that's why. You're drunk, aren't you?"

"I'm not drunk. I just have a headache."

"...What?"

"Is it okay if I lie down?"

"…That’s obviously not okay, right? It sounds like you’re not just drunk, but also sick."

"I'm fine."

"You’re not fine."

"I said I'm fine."

Sendai-san confidently asserts again and lies back down on the floor. Her eyes are open, but there's a crease in her brow. Her posture screams anything but "fine," and I let out a small sigh.

"It's fine if you want to lie down, but if your head hurts, why'd you drink?"

"It wasn't hurting before. I just suddenly realized it started."

" ‘Realized it started’...?"

There's no way she's okay. This person should not have alcohol.

"Sendai-san, I'm borrowing your tablet."

Instead of going back to my room to get my phone, I decide to make use of what we have here.

Without waiting for her reply, I grab her tablet and search for what to do in such situations.

The internet is incredibly useful; it tells me things about alcohol I didn’t know. Not everything is true, which is tricky, but after compiling the information, it seems I don't need to take Sendai-san to the hospital.

For some reason, there are people who experience headaches immediately after drinking.

Having found some tips that seem applicable for someone like Sendai-san, I head to the shared space, fill a glass with water, and return to the room.

I sit next to Sendai-san, who's sprawled on the floor, and say, "Get up and drink this water."

I'm not sure if it will work, but it's better than nothing.

"If Miyagi kisses me, I'll drink the water."

"...What?"

"If you don’t kiss me, I'm not drinking."

With those silly words, the dazed Sendai-san sits up and leans against the bed.

"Sendai-san, do you not realize your condition?"

My father never came home drunk. I can't remember if my mother ever drank.

I barely have any experience with drunk people, but this Sendai-san, saying such nonsensical things, is definitely drunk.

"I do know my condition."

Sendai-san, drunk on alcohol, speaks confidently and picks up the glass with the cider. She then takes a gulp.

"Why are you drinking more?"

I try to stop this nonsensical Sendai-san.

"Because Miyagi won't kiss me."

"You're being ridiculous."

"Yeah, I'm ridiculous."

And with that, she takes another sip of the cider.

This is hopeless. She's an incorrigible fool and an unreasonable drunk.

So, so, so.

Naturally, it leads to me conceding.

"I'll kiss you, so put the glass down."

Resolutely, I place the glass of water on the table, and Sendai-san obediently puts her glass down and closes her eyes.

With her flushed cheeks, Sendai-san is beautiful, but utterly foolish.

I sigh dramatically, and without another word, I lean in and press

my lips against Sendai-san's.

It barely lasts a second.

As soon as I pull away, she tugs at my clothes and presses her lips to mine again.

Startled by the unsolicited kiss, I push her shoulder.

Sendai-san repeats, "If Miyagi kisses me."

So, I kiss her once more and hand her the glass of water.

"Drink."

Sendai-san looks at the glass in response to my voice. For a brief moment, she turns to me with a pleading look, but after another kiss, she finally drinks the water.

"Thanks."

With a feeble voice, the empty glass lands on the table.

"Sendai-san. Today is my birthday, you know."

"I know. Happy birthday."

Holding her temple, Sendai-san replies in a cheery voice.

"Thank you. ...Somehow, even though it’s my birthday, I'm the one doing all this for you, Sendai-san."

"I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize."

"Even at the festival, you’ve been apologizing an awful lot these days."

"I'm sorry. ...For only showing you my uncool side."

Though there’s no need to apologize, Sendai-san does so, with a face full of regret. She’s like a scolded puppy, and it makes me feel a pang of sympathy.

This side of Sendai-san is rare.

But, if we look at just "recently," it's not uncommon—it’s rather typical.

In short, during this summer break, Sendai-san isn't being herself.

"...But, it's kind of nice. It makes you seem more human."

I don't dislike this pathetic side of hers.

Presumably, this side of Sendai-san is one nobody else gets to see, a version only for me.

Thinking like that, I want to keep watching her, this sad 'puppy' of a girl.

"Since it's your birthday, I wanted to show you my good side."

As she spoke, Sendai-san leaned against me.

Everyone knows the Sendai-san who handles everything with ease.

I’ve been watching her since high school, and even as a university student, she's just as capable. It's natural to accept that the effortlessly competent Sendai-san stands before others.

However, I can’t stand the thought of this side of her being shown to anyone but me.

"Sendai-san, you're banned from drinking. Absolutely no drinking outside."

"But alcohol is tasty."

"Whether it tastes good or not isn’t the issue here."

The idea of her being tipsy and showing such a side to others is absolutely out of the question. And the thought of her possibly telling someone else, "I won't drink unless you kiss me," is even more unacceptable.

There's no way I can allow the version of her who loses her wits

with just a gentle push to exist anywhere other than in this house.

"Is it okay if it's just in front of Miyagi?"

Her voice, as limp as overcooked pasta, murmurs in response, and I firmly reply, "No, it's not."

"Come on. Let’s drink together. I'll be mindful of the amount."

"Just lie down and be quiet. I'll get you some clothes, so tell me where they are."

"I've got a headache, but I can talk. Let’s chat."

"Talking will only lead to you saying more nonsense, so you don’t need to. Where are your clothes?"

I push against the arm of Sendai-san, who’s leaning on me.

"Clothes?"

"If you don't change, your dress will get wrinkled."

Today, she's dressed beautifully, as I requested.

It would be a shame if it got wrinkled or stained.

"It's fine. I'll just sleep like this."

As she sulkily attempts to lie down on the floor, I pull her arm.

"It’s not fine."

"There are plenty of ways to get rid of wrinkles."

"Apparently, it’s not good to wear restrictive clothing when you’re like this, so change out of them. Not just clothes, but your underwear too."

"...You're a pervert, aren't you, Miyagi?"

"I'm not a pervert."

"But you want me to be naked, right?"

"I didn’t say to take off that much. Think before you speak."

"Then undress me."

"What do you mean ‘then’? That makes no sense."

I'm irritated.

It's normal for her to say silly things, but drunk Sendai-san is being ten times sillier. If this continues, we’ll get nowhere, and I’ll want to leave her sitting there in her beautiful dress.

"Sendai-san, listen seriously. I'm worried about your dress, but I'm worried about you too, so change clothes and get in bed by yourself."

I instruct slowly so the drunk Sendai-san can understand, and she says, "T-shirts are in the chest. Go ahead and open it," before starting to take off her dress.

Following her direction, I rummage through her chest, retrieve a T-shirt and sweatpants, and even though I was supposed to be the star today, I help the drunk Sendai-san change into them. I then help her into bed.

"...I'm exhausted."

I let out a sigh, coupled with the words that slipped out of my mouth, and empty the glass that had been filled with cider.

Even now, I can’t find it as tasty as Sendai-san does.

I select a non-carbonated cider from the array of bottles on the table and pour it into a glass. After taking a sip, I exhale.

"...This would taste better with carbonation."

I try a dry one, and it’s clearly not to my taste. The sweet one is somewhat better than the dry, but only marginally so.

—Maybe I could share the "delicious" taste with Sendai-san.

That silly notion led me to try the cider, but all I discovered was

that I couldn’t share a sense of "delicious" with Sendai-san.

Be it beer or any other alcohol, I doubt I could feel the same way she does.

Alcohol isn’t interesting to me.

I get up and sit at the edge of the bed where Sendai-san is lying down. I brush her cheek and touch her earring.

"...Hazuki. Don’t you dare drink with anyone else but me."

I trace a finger behind her earlobe.

Clipping her earring, the fastening pricks my thumb.

It’s painful.

So much so that I won’t forget today’s version of Sendai-san.

I pull my finger away from her ear. Today’s memories are taken over by Sendai-san, from eating cake to giving me a key case, and most vividly, getting drunk. I probably won’t ever forget my twentieth birthday.

"How frustrating."

I gently tap her forehead and place the stuffed penguin on her stomach.

Chapter 128

Thoughts on Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 371

"Good morning, Hazuki! How was Shiori-chan's birthday?"

Although Mio's voice wasn't loud enough to fill the whole lecture room, it hit my ears with enough force to make me want to bury my head in my hands.

Mio briskly walked into the room, radiating her usual energy, and I sighed quietly. Before I even met her gaze, she asked the one question I most wanted to avoid.

"You look dead tired, Hazuki. Are you okay?"

Without waiting for an answer, Mio sat in the seat next to mine. Her taking the seat beside me was routine and nothing to fuss over, but her opening question today was enough to make me sigh.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

It came out low and muttering.

"Doesn't sound like you're fine. Did something happen on Shiori-chan's birthday?"

"Nothing in particular. Like I said yesterday, we enjoyed some delicious food and had a great time."

Awakening in the dead of night, I turned my otherwise idle phone back on and found a message from Mio.

It was a question about how Miyagi's birthday went, and I gave a brief summary of the nice parts before going back to sleep.

"I figured since you said you drank, maybe you got so loud and

drunk that the neighbors complained."

"I didn't have that much, and I was knocked out pretty quick."

Mio had asked if I celebrated turning twenty with alcohol, and I had said yes. In hindsight, I wished I'd held back. Alcohol impacted me into saying things I normally wouldn't.

It's likely to become troublesome, from this morning on.

Mentioning alcohol to Mio never leads to anything good.

"Hazuki, since you're finally allowed to drink now, why not join us at the party tonight?"

A bubbly voice piped up next to me, confirming my suspicions.

"I've got a tutoring session today."

"Too bad. Maybe next time, then."

"Sorry, but I'm firm on refusing drinking parties."

Never drink outside.

That's what Miyagi told me yesterday.

I thought about it deeply too, so going out to drink is really something I shouldn't do.

"Why the sudden refusal? Didn't you say yesterday that the alcohol was delicious?"

"Well, I get tipsy pretty fast."

Alcohol may taste pleasant, but it's no good for me.

I become reckless and end up saying careless things.

I found myself telling Miyagi things she didn't need to know.

Last night, I turned into quite the drunk; she must have found me difficult to handle.

Fortunately, the important memory of "Miyagi's birthday" remains intact in my mind without losing even a small fragment, but that also means I clearly remember showing Miyagi a drunken, childlike version of myself throwing a tantrum.

If I had lost my memory of yesterday, I might have felt even more miserable, digging an even deeper pit within my soul. But even though I clearly remember it, I still feel depressed, so it’s hopeless.

"Hazuki, you’re weak with alcohol? You seemed like the type who'd handle it without changing a bit."

Mio gave me an unexpected glance.

"I wish! But for now, drinking outside is a no-go. Who knows how I'd act, being drunk."

Miyagi warned me sternly not to drink, and the prospect of being 'drunk'— losing my normal self—is downright terrifying.

Words that should stay inside slip out unwittingly, increasing the likelihood of telling Miyagi things I shouldn't.

—I love Miyagi.

Those are words I absolutely can't say while influenced by alcohol.

This "love" hidden within my heart waits for when I choose to let it be known. Alcohol shouldn't decide when that is.

Moreover, drinking something this dangerous outside could lead to confessing my feelings for Miyagi in front of others.

Miyagi should be the first to hear my confession.

"Even if you get drunk, I'll bring you home safely. So, next time, join me for drinks."

"I'll think about it."

Despite knowing my answer won't change, I give an ambiguous reply. Continuing the conversation risks Mio insistently creating unwanted drinking plans.

"Well, I'll invite you again, and I want to hear a positive answer then," Mio smiled cheerily, so I returned the gesture with, "I'll think it over seriously."

"By the way, is Shiori-chan much of a drinker?"

"Well..."

If I had to categorize her, Miyagi is more on the strong side with alcohol.

I awoke to find all the half-consumed cider gone, and she confirmed she'd finished it. Not only that, the fridge was suddenly lacking in alcohol, which she also confessed to drinking up.

And she had no trace of a hangover, showing she wasn't putting up any pretense about it, so she definitely isn't weak.

I was curious why she drank the drinks that didn’t seem to match her taste. When I asked her, she deflected with, "it felt like a waste not to."

"So, what's the rest of that thought, Hazuki?"

Mio pried with visible intrigue.

I fiddled with my necklace chain, slightly pulling it.

"She’s kind of weak. Drinking parties are probably too much."

Lying isn't ideal, but I didn't want to share the truth.

If I said she handles alcohol well, Mio would relish in inviting her out for a drinking session.

I can't allow that.

Even if Miyagi is good with alcohol, I don’t know her limits, and if she was forced to overdrink, anything might happen.

Furthermore, I can't stand the thought of Miyagi among a drunken crowd. I don’t want to see her harassed by a drunk, nor would I rest easy knowing it's happening when I'm not around.

"Seeing drunk Shiori-chan sounds great. But, don't worry, I won't overdo it. How about we all have some drinks together sometime?"

Mio said something she didn't need to say, and I reply with a smile.

"Miyagi didn’t seem to particularly like alcohol, so it's unlikely."

"I see. But I'd like to at least try drinking with everyone, even if just for the vibe, whenever Maika-chan can join in."

"Next year, I guess."

Offering an ambiguous, vague response, the lecturer entered the room, and Mio turned forward, softly mentioning, "Maybe we'll celebrate Hazuki and Shiori-chan's birthdays first."

Turning forward myself, I pressed my hand to my forehead.

This morning, Miyagi treated me as if nothing had happened.

Even when I confirmed my recollection of last night, she neither complained nor nagged about me drinking.

And obviously, we hadn’t kissed.

Letting my thoughts spill out like a dam breaking due to alcohol is something I must avoid, yet there's a part of me that wishes to experience Miyagi's gentle side once more.

Maybe today, I should buy more cider.

Or perhaps a sweet drink that Miyagi might enjoy.

If by any chance we could share drinks and get tipsy together...

As my mind floated to such ideas, I let out a sigh.

Thoughts on Miyagi (II)

Part 372

"Sendai-san, is Mio-san really planning to throw a birthday party?"

"Seems like it. She asked us to let her know when we're available."

Mio is someone who acts in haste, and right after class ended, she sent a message in the "Strange Birds" group chat, announcing that we'd hold a birthday party next month.

"Sendai-san, you remember everything from yesterday, right?"

"I do, but why?"

"It was hard dealing with you yesterday, you know."

"Yeah, sounds like it."

From what I remember of yesterday, I was exactly the kind of drunkard who would cling to Miyagi. I can easily imagine how tiresome handling someone like me must have been. Thanks to that, I've etched into my heart the lesson not to drink excessively.

"So, could you do one thing for me?"

Miyagi said softly, looking at me.

Her words might not explicitly contain the word "order," but I understood that what she just said held the weight of one. I also realized that I had no right to refuse her request.

"Just one thing?"

"Just one thing."

Upon saying that, Miyagi placed the spoon she had been using to eat her pudding down.

Thoughts on Miyagi (III)

Part 373

The shared space is enveloped in silence.

It's because Miyagi isn't speaking.

She's not saying a word, merely staring at the pudding and not looking at me.

If she were to say anything within the bounds of reason, I would comply. But as the silence stretches, anxiety creeps in about what she might say. The price for "taking care of a drunk," shouldn't be such a serious burden.

"What should I do?"

I inquire, looking at Miyagi.

"I'll tell you now."

A low voice reaches me, but no further words follow. When I call "Miyagi," I hear a faint "Sendai-san."

Miyagi inhales deeply, exhales, and fixes her gaze on me.

She opens her mouth to speak but then drops her gaze.

Following orders is something I've done countless times, so it's not something that should cause hesitation. The same goes for Miyagi. In the past, she had guided me with firm orders, and even in college, she's naturally voiced what she wanted me to do.

Hence, I'm curious about what exactly has Miyagi hesitating now.

"Miyagi, what should I do?"

As I ask once more from my side, Miyagi finally speaks.

"…Can you do something about the birthday party Mio-san wants to

organize?"

I see.

So that's what it is.

I understand why it was hard to say.

"I'd like to do something about it, but I think it’s probably impossible."

Celebrating a friend's birthday.

It's a natural thing to do, not something strange.

Also, Mio loves such events. She’s been reaching out several times during summer break, expressing her desire to celebrate my birthday.

I've been declining with various excuses, but this time I've been told that she plans to include Utsunomiya and celebrate Miyagi’s birthday together with mine.

"I know it's impossible, but…"

Miyagi murmurs in a dry, crumbly voice, as she stares at her pudding hard enough to bore a hole in it.

Even I am not exactly excited about the birthday party.

However, Mio means no harm—quite the opposite. She only has pure intentions. Her invitations come from a genuine desire to have fun with everyone.

Utsunomiya, who is Miyagi’s friend and is genuinely nice, is also looking forward to the birthday party. Even as someone who can’t be said to be great with social interactions in college, I can't bring myself to brush off the commitment as if it never existed.

"Hmm, I get how you feel, Miyagi, but Mio and Utsunomiya seem to be looking forward to it."

I'll do something about it.

Miyagi looks at me, who is unable to utter even that simple phrase.

"…Once is enough for a birthday."

"Eh?"

"It's nothing."

Miyagi's words swallow my own, and the shared space is once again enveloped in silence.

I reflect on the world without words from three seconds ago.

Once is enough for a birthday.

The words that I reflexively replied to were such that it seemed okay to only have a birthday celebration with me, causing my heart to leap.

Miyagi, saying such a thing, is so cute.

Miyagi, saying such a thing to me, is incredibly cute.

She's so cute, so cute that it makes me extremely happy.

I think one celebration is enough as well.

But thinking of Mio and Utsunomiya makes my heart ache.

I am surprised to realize that even someone like me, who needs no one but Miyagi, could feel this kind of heartache over neglecting promises with them.

"…It's a bit unfair to Maika and Mio-san, but."

Miyagi speaks softly.

"Instead of thinking of it as a birthday party, what if you just thought of it as a normal gathering to hang out?"

"I only said that casually. ...It's not something I really want you to consider."

We both understand.

There are commitments in this world that cannot be refused, things that can’t be changed despite understanding them. Yet, the feeling of wanting to do something about them persists.

"Miyagi."

Calling her softly, I stand up.

I walk over to where Miyagi sits, and our eyes meet as I take her hand.

I lean forward and gently press my lips against the back of her hand.

"Don’t just do whatever you want."

I hear her flat voice as I kiss her fingertips, and she pulls her hand away from mine.

Chasing after that hand is futile.

I kneel on the floor and remove one of Miyagi's socks.

The view of her denim-clad leg offers a scene different from what I knew in high school.

"Sendai-san, put my sock back on."

"After a little while."

Touching Miyagi's heel, I lift her foot.

As I have done many times before, I press my lips against the arch of her foot, slowly rolling my tongue across the warm, firm skin, warmer and firmer than any pudding.

Her foot trembles slightly and withdraws from my tongue.

I draw her foot back, lightly pressing my lips and softly sucking.

"Sendai-san, what’s going on?"

Her low voice descends as I answer with nonsensical words, "If we're going to do this, a skirt would be better."

"There's no need to lick my feet now."

“Does that mean it’s okay if it’s not now?”

I trace her toes, softly caressing her sole.

Miyagi murmurs, "Even if it's not now, I don't want it," and tries to pull her foot away.

I kiss the top of her foot and look up at her.

"Are you not giving those kinds of orders anymore?"

"We don’t have that kind of relationship."

"Just do it, Shiori."

"I never said you could call me 'Shiori.'"

"Shiori."

When I call her clearly, Miyagi lightly kicks my shoulder, saying in a monotonous voice.

"I'm not going to call you Hazuki now."

Her voice isn't gentle.

But since Miyagi doesn’t run away and stays here with me, I don’t think she minds being addressed by that name.

Without orders, I kiss the tips of her feet and trace my teeth over her toe joints.

I strongly suck on the tensed arch, letting my tongue travel up her ankle.

I kiss the knee through her jeans, sliding my hand inside the cuff.

"Sendai-san, stop."

Catching the hand that attempts to push my forehead away, I place a kiss on her palm.

"No."

Miyagi's voice echoes in my ears.

Even back when we wore uniforms, we had commitments that couldn’t be refused.

Wanting to be seen as a sociable person, I often acted in accordance with invitations from Umina and her group.

Miyagi prioritized her friends over me.

Moreover, the times we managed to meet, bound by these unrefusable commitments, was significantly shorter than the time spent apart.

But now, it’s different.

But even if it's different, it's still not enough.

"Miyagi."

Holding her hand tightly, I bring my lips to her fingertips.

We are not friends or roommates; without an order between us, I believe we should close the distance.

"...Shall we make the next promise?"

I whisper softly.

I understand that my words are insufficient.

But Miyagi, who seems to grasp my intent, glares at me.

"Why does it lead to that kind of conversation?"

Something often done in this house, something not done in a long while.

Something we promised not to do in high school.

Whether it's in Miyagi's bed or mine, I want to do that kind of thing.

In those moments, Miyagi takes the initiative to come closer.

Because of that, I'm able to embrace what is most important me.

To make a once-in-a-lifetime birthday feel like it can happen twice.

I want to hold her so tightly that the number of times doesn't matter anymore.

"Because I want to cherish you more than any birthday."

As I kiss her hand, she kicks my knee and says, "That's not fair."

Thoughts on Miyagi (IV)

Part 374

— "As long as 'that day' is not specified, it's fine."

Miyagi answered softly yesterday.

Even if she refused, it would be okay.

But I didn't want her to refuse.

The words I spoke became a promise tinged with ambiguity, providing me with relief.

The fact that the day can't be specified means I don't even know if it will be before the birthday party Mio planned, but the important part is that Miyagi made a promise.

The details don't matter. Yesterday, I left 'the promised day' to Miyagi, and today, I have no regrets.

I don't know when I will hold Miyagi in my arms, but that's okay. Since this promise was prompted by the upcoming birthday party, I believe the day isn't too far off.

Probably, certainly.

But even if it isn't, that's okay.

I'm happy that Miyagi has taken a step towards me.

Sometimes she declines things that no one else would, without batting an eye, so the promise I received yesterday is meaningful and precious.

I pause cutting the tomatoes, looking at Miyagi, who's locked in a staring contest with the frying pan, while preparing breakfast beside me.

"No need to worry, the yolk is intact."

A voice, unfit for the refreshing morning, reaches me, and I reply, "That's not what I'm worried about."

"Then why were you watching?"

"I was just thinking you've gotten better at cooking."

On the day after we made our promise, Miyagi's voice only carries extreme displeasure, but even so, I want to savor the presence of her cooking next to me.

Miyagi from some time ago probably wouldn't have stood beside me on a day like this, and I doubt she would have cooked.

"Fried eggs aren't really cooking."

A statement I would never have heard from Miyagi a few years ago reaches my ears, and I tell her, "It's a fine dish." After finishing cutting the tomatoes, I glance at the toaster, soon ready to serve the bread, and set the butter and jam on the table.

"This Saturday, how about we stay up till morning planning for winter break?"

As I prepare the dishes, I ask Miyagi, and she suspiciously questions back.

"Winter break plans?"

"Yeah, winter break plans."

"This coming Saturday is still October."

"Yep."

"Isn't it too early to plan? And talking all night, how many plans are you thinking of making?"

Her suspicious tone shifts to overt annoyance as she glares at the eggs instead of me.

"Why not? It's just planning, and chatting about where to go is fun."

"It's not fun."

Her unsociable voice negates my words.

But I'm not planning to give up.

"Then what does Miyagi find fun? If you tell me, we can do that on Saturday."

"Don't just decide we're doing something on Saturday."

"Do you have plans with Utsunomiya on Saturday?"

I gently probe her steadfast demeanor.

"...No."

"Then we don't have to talk about winter break. We can watch movies or play games all night instead—let's just make plans together."

"That attitude's annoying."

With a dissatisfied voice, Miyagi places the fried eggs on a plate, and arranges the tomatoes I cut. A sharp sound from the toaster announces the bread is ready, but I watch Miyagi instead of the bread.

"I want you to make plans with me."

The birthday party organized by Mio.

The promise I made with Miyagi yesterday.

Though these plans don't have a defined date, they aren't in the distant future. That's why I want us to increase our time together.

I want to create moments where even if I can't embrace the one most precious to me, Miyagi might be okay with having a second birthday celebration.

Even if the promise we made yesterday remains unfulfilled, I want to fill Miyagi's mind with thoughts of me, so that I can get through the birthday party that will likely be held soon.

"If you're busy on Saturday, then I'll give up. If you don't want to be with me, come up with a reason."

I take the bread from the toaster, placing it on a plate and taking it to the table along with the eggs before going to Miyagi's side.

"...If I'm free Saturday, we do something together until Sunday morning?"

"Exactly."

I want to be with Miyagi on both Saturday and Sunday.

That's the essence of this conversation, with no hidden motives.

But likely, even if I say so, Miyagi wouldn't believe it. Thus, I decided to stay up all night to ensure she doesn't suspect it's 'the promised day.'

"...What do you plan to do in the morning?"

Miyagi questions, as if seeking something.

"Eat breakfast together. After that, I'd like to do something together. If you're tired, we can rest in our own rooms."

Nothing strange or peculiar.

I know there's little trust in such words from me.

"...You said you'd stay awake, so make sure you don't fall asleep."

"Of course. I promise."

Breakfast is laid out on the table, but there's something I must do before eating.

I reach for Miyagi's ear.

I trace the flower blooming on her earlobe with my fingertip.

This cold object is meant to solidify our promise, and gently leaning in to transfer my warmth, I press my lips against it.

Hard yet soft.

The feel of the earring and her ear connects Miyagi and my promise.

I withdraw my lips, pressing them once more against the plumeria earring.

"Miyagi, promise me too."

I whisper in her ear, and she replies, "Promise about what?"

"Seal yesterday's promise on my earring so you won't forget."

Such a ritual isn’t truly necessary.

That's why I didn’t bring up kissing the earring yesterday.

I don't believe Miyagi would break our promise, and I trust her even without an oath. However, I ask her to seal it to have a part of Miyagi's warmth before heading to university.

"Even without it, I'd keep my promise."

"I know."

"Then why ask for it?"

Miyagi softly kicks my ankle, glaring in dissatisfaction.

"I've sworn it, so shouldn't you as well?" I say.

Miyagi frowns as she grabs my shirt.

The fabric around my stomach is pulled taut, and my ear is filled with her warm breath. The sensation on my ear prompts me to wrap my hands around Miyagi's waist. As I draw her closer, something hard grazes my ear, bringing a dull pain.

"I wasn't asking for a bite."

I whisper, and the pain deepens.

However, the hardness soon leaves, replaced by a light bite on my

neck.

Gently, not leaving a mark.

Far from a vow, it ends quickly as Miyagi's warmth pulls away from me.

"If you randomly decide the date, today's promise is off."

"I understand."

I smile at the grumpy Miyagi, and she adds a note to the promise I initiated, "And on Saturday, if you fall asleep, I'll wake you up."

Miyagi touches my necklace.

Her fingertips trace the four-leaf clover and press it firmly.

"Don't worry. I'll stay up the whole time."

I place my hand over hers and vow, "I promise."

Chapter 129

The Place Sendai-san Should Be (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 375

Although I made the promise, we haven't decided on when the day would be.

That's both a good and a bad thing.

Deciding on a date would make me overly conscious of it, like during Christmas, and I would become restless.

I didn't choose a date so that I wouldn't turn into that kind of person, but now that nothing is set, the reality of having to choose the day myself and convey it to Sendai-san is overwhelming.

Sigh.

I let out a sigh and sit on the bed. It's 9:25 in the morning, after breakfast. Even though it's Saturday, I don't feel at ease.

At least today isn't the promised day. It's just a day where we decided to plan our winter break schedule together, a day to spend with Sendai-san.

There's no need to be on guard.

Sendai-san expressly added the condition of staying up until morning today. Planning the winter break schedule isn't something you need to pull an all-nighter for, so that condition subtly indicated that today is not a day for those kinds of activities.

Hence, I arranged to meet with her this Saturday.

Yet, I can't calm down. I feel somewhat gloomy.

Simply put, I believe today could unexpectedly be the day, and deep

down, I don’t fully trust Sendai-san.

Realizing this unwanted truth has plunged me into a despondent mood.

I could conclude that it's all because of Sendai-san’s bad behavior.

But I know that Sendai-san would never do something I truly despise. The reason I still find it hard to trust her is solely because there's still a part of me that's unwilling to try.

I don't want to be betrayed.

It's not that I don't trust anyone; I trust most people. For instance, I trust Maika and Ami. Friends are inherently trustworthy, and while it would sadden me to be betrayed by them, I would never regret having trusted them.

But Sendai-san is different.

If she were to betray me, I would definitely regret trusting her.

It would lead to endless days of remembering when I was betrayed, bringing nothing but heartache.

I would be never be able to forget it and would continue searching for the reason for the betrayal forever.

Then, I would likely seal any thoughts of Sendai-san deep in my heart, to be hidden away.

I let out another sigh as I stand up.

Grabbing the black cat lounging on the bookshelf, I take a walk around the room.

I stroke the small head of the stuffed animal, then sit on the bed.

Imagining the future becomes unbearable because it appears so bleak.

Things I don't wish to happen can be vividly imagined, yet the future I wish to pursue is hazy and unclear.

Flopping onto the bed alongside the black cat, I wish we hadn't made that promise.

I want to question why I allowed myself to be swayed by Sendai-san, or rather, why I thought it was okay to be swayed. But even questioning that wouldn't change the outcome.

I don't know what I really want.

It's always like this. There's so much about myself that I can't figure out, and I grow more and more frustrated.

Sigh.

Yet another sigh slips out, when a knock, knock, is heard at the door. I return the black cat to the bookshelf, and respond to the person on the other side, "Come in."

"I made iced tea. Want some?"

Sendai-san opens the door, smiling, but doesn't step inside.

"I'll have some."

With that response, Sendai-san enters, tray in hand, setting two glasses on the table and offering a snack as she says, "This too."

"What's this?"

Potato chips and chocolate.

I haven't seen this packaging before; it features the two designs on it.

"Mio said they were delicious, so I bought them."

A name I didn't want to hear slips from Sendai-san's lips as she sits beside me.

"Oh."

It's not that I dislike Mio-san, but I can't think of a positive response right now.

“Should I open it?”

“I'll do it myself.”

With a burst, I tear open the bag of chips, revealing chocolate-covered potato chips as the package promised.

“Well, thanks for this.”

After giving my thanks, I take a bite.

Salty and sweet—an interesting blend that melds without any clash, leaving a delightful harmony in my mouth, reminiscent of jam and butter on toast.

“Is it good?”

Asked by Sendai-san, I nod and say, "Delicious."

I generally don’t eat things I can’t anticipate the taste of, but spending time with Sendai-san often leads me to try new tasty things. Although Mio-san's involvement nags at me, tasty things remain tasty.

“I’m glad,” Sendai-san smiles brightly, taking a chip from the bag I’m holding and popping it into her mouth.

“Indeed, it is delicious.”

In her animated voice, she adds, “I might just buy some more.” It’s something to be welcomed, but her next words are less so.

“Wanna come with me?”

I promptly say, "No," and add, "But you should buy more."

“You're stingy, Miyagi.”

“You’ll buy it, right?”

“Well, yes.”

Accompanied by that flat voice, Sendai-san munches on another chip. I place the bag I was holding on the table and sip my iced tea.

“Miyagi, are you feeling unwell today?”

Sendai-san mutters, looking at me.

“Not really.”

“Really?”

“I’m fine.”

To prove my words, I grab a chip and loudly crunch on it.
Truthfully, I’m not unwell; just not feeling very clear-minded.

“If Miyagi says so, I'll take your word for it, then.”

Sendai-san quietly states, following it up in a gentle voice, “So, any places you’d like to visit during winter break?”

“None.”

“It’s not even noon and we’re done talking already.”

“It’s your fault for starting so early. We could have made plans after lunch.”

“What would I do until lunch then?”

“Whether you’re bored or not isn’t my problem.”

“Miyagi, you can be so cold at times like these.”

Sendai-san lets out a dramatic sigh.

But I’m not at fault.

The blame lies with Sendai-san for not giving me more breathing room.

I wasn’t expecting to discuss winter break plans this early, hence I haven’t gotten my thoughts sorted out yet. Even talking about it after lunch seemed early to me.

So, she should forgive being met with a curt response.

“Miyagi, how about the zoo? We haven’t gone since we last talked about it. The aquarium works too.”

“We don’t have to go during winter break.”

My voice lowers, and I suddenly feel as though I've done something wrong, so I ask her.

"...Where would you like to go, Sendai-san?"

"Hmm," she hums beside me, accompanied by the crinkling sound of the potato chip bag, then the crunch of the chocolate-covered potato chips.

"I thought I’d go wherever you wanted to go, Miyagi."

Sendai-san smiles at me, leaning against the bed.

"You always used to say we should go to a hot spring."

I pick up the bag of potato chips from the table, cradling it as I pull out another chip.

"Would you go to a hot spring?"

"No."

I nibble on a chip, glaring at Sendai-san.

"That's why I didn't suggest it. But I might want to try a trip somewhere."

"... A trip? Where to?"

"Anywhere really, but I’d like to spend the night."

"No."

"Then, two nights."

With an amused tone, she snatches the bag of potato chips away.

"No way, and give that back."

"I'll feed you. If you don’t like that, then let's go on a trip together."

"I hate both."

"You can't just refuse without hesitation—that's unfair. Think about it a bit."

"If you want me to consider it, at least suggest a destination."

"...Is it okay if I take my time to think about it now?"

"No."

I firmly refuse and snatch the bag of potato chips back from Sendai-san.

A trip lasting two nights is out of the question. Even a single night isn't worth considering.

However, a short day trip might be fun.

"Where would you be willing to go with me, Miyagi?"

"I don't know, but choose somewhere fun."

"Then, how about we think about that together today?"

With that, Sendai-san offers me a gentle smile.

The Place Sendai-san Should Be (II)

Part 376

A radio tower that stretches towards the sky, a town famous for its delicious soup dumplings and pork buns.

Hiking trails and amusement parks.

Even though I rejected everything by morning, Sendai-san seems unwilling to give up. We had lunch, and even as evening approaches, she keeps slipping in plans for winter break amidst our idle chatter.

"Miyagi, how about a botanical garden? I heard they have illuminations at night."

Sendai-san peers at me while browsing places we could visit and return from without having to stay the night on her smartphone.

"Staying out until night makes it tough to get back," I point out.

"Well, maybe, but..." she says coyly and places her smartphone on my bed. "You're shooting down all my ideas, so we have nowhere to go," she adds with a touch of dissatisfaction.

"It's because you haven't mentioned a place I'd actually want to say yes to," I retort.

While I might seem uncooperative, deciding on plans for something as far into the future as winter break seems premature. Plans can change easily, so I hesitate to discuss something so far off.

If it's just a simple outing, I wouldn't mind going with Sendai-san.

However, the further away the date is, the more feelings and anticipation build up for that day.

Though I don't intend to eagerly await our plans, if those plans just remain plans and never come to fruition, I'd end up resenting Sendai-san and likely end up disappointed in myself.

"Let's decide on winter break plans during winter break and watch a movie now."

Watching Sendai-san browse potential winter break destinations isn't all that bad, but it feels like making winter plans right now is beyond me.

"I thought this was going to happen," Sendai-san responds quietly, her gaze shifting to the tablet on the table.

"Talking about winter break feels a bit too soon, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I get that."

After saying that in a deflated voice, she suggests, "Then, as Miyagi says, let's wrap up the winter break talk and pick a movie to watch," with even less energy.

"Aren't you being a bit dismissive?"

"Well, you won't share where you want to go."

She hands me the tablet with a "Here," and I furrow my brow.

"I don't have anywhere I want to go."

"…You will still go somewhere with me over winter break, right?"

Her soft yet insistent voice leaves no room for evasiveness, prompting me to respond, "Depends on the destination."

"But you said you have nowhere you want to go."

"Well, it's up to you to find a place I might want to go, Sendai-san."

"What kind of place would that be then?"

"As I mentioned at lunch, somewhere that's not cold, tiring, or boring."

"Seems like only a movie theater would fit that criteria."

"That's just fine."

Hearing how nonchalant my voice sounded, I glance at Sendai-san, whose exaggeratedly complex expression makes me chuckle slightly.

"I'll think of some other places by winter break."

"That’s fine too."

In moments like these, I wish I could come up with something clever to say. But around Sendai-san, my words feel weighed down, and clever thoughts don’t come to me.

I can’t even compromise enough to suggest something as simple as an amusement park.

So I end up glaring down at the crocodile plush staring blankly back at me.

"Then, Miyagi, why don’t you pick the movie we'll watch?"

"Don’t you have one you want to see, Sendai-san?"

Gazing at the clueless crocodile, I ask.

I couldn’t compromise much about winter break plans, and I’m not too keen on doing so. However, I can concede on a movie.

"I want to watch whatever Miyagi wants to watch."

"You always say things like that."

"But you'd get mad if I picked a horror movie."

"…As long as it's not too scary, I can watch."

I've never liked horror movies that feature the supernatural, messing with my head on nights alone, and I still don’t.

The terror from films could make me see shapes in the dark and spark unfounded fears from mundane noises, a childish fear that I couldn’t quell alone, leaving me to live with it until morning.

But tonight, Sendai-san is here until morning.

"Choose something good," I say, handing the tablet over to Sendai-san.

She scrutinizes my face before looking down at the tablet, murmuring, "Well, let's see."

As I peer at the screen to see what kind of movie she'd pick, I'm unnerved by the titles she's browsing, ones I'd never choose to watch myself, prompting me to re-focus on the oblivious crocodile and push the haunting titles from my mind.

After engaging in a staring contest with the crocodile for a while, a cheerful voice cuts through.

"It's based on a game. Something like this should be good, right?"

Without looking at the tablet, I ask, "What kind of game?" and she responds, "A zombie game."

"…That sounds scary. I've never tried it."

"Really? So, should we choose something else?"

"No, let's watch it."

I look up to see the tablet.

No screen filled with zombies emerged, just the face of a woman, not frightening in the least. Sendai-san places the tablet on the table and presses play.

The screen moves, and sound begins to fill the room.

Evening approaches.

Yet, daylight still lingers outside.

Even so, I pull the crocodile closer and edge nearer to Sendai-san.

As ten minutes pass, then twenty.

The film progresses, and scenes that make me want to cover my ears or close my eyes increase, leaving me tense. A glance at Sendai-san shows she's enjoying the movie.

If I had to say, it is certainly scary.

However, it’s not unbearably terrifying.

The storyline keeps me intrigued, it’s what they call a "well-done horror."

Still, I've never been fond of frightening things.

A sudden loud noise from behind startles me with a shiver down my shoulders.

Turning impulsively away from the tablet's sounds, I hear a voice say, "Sorry. It's my phone." The next thing I see is Sendai-san reaching for her phone resting on the bed.

Yet, the phone's ringtone doesn't stop.

She sits back down next to me.

Frozen, her eyes remain fixed on the phone.

"Sendai-san, it’s ringing."

My words go unanswered.

The tense score from the tablet stops—likely paused by Sendai-san—leaving the ringtone echoing through the room.

"Aren’t you going to answer?"

I ask softly, but she takes a while before barely uttering, "It stopped," in a monotone voice. There's no mistaking those words, and indeed, the ringtone disappears from my ears.

But almost immediately, another incoming alert makes the phone equally adamant about making its presence known.

Yet, Sendai-san merely stares at her phone, which continues to make a racket, without moving.

"...Who's it from?"

Though I feel I shouldn't pry, the question slips out, and Sendai-san mumbles the answer.

"My parents."

The words escape her lips and sink into me. Despite barely being audible, they carry a weight that halts my actions.

The ringtone fills the room, the only sound left as we both continue to gaze at the phone.

Whether it was a minute or ten, I couldn't tell.

The phone eventually falls silent, only to make a short alert sound.

"Seems like a message just came through."

Sendai-san quietly announces and begins reading the text.

Her expression doesn’t change.

Her eyes flicker over the message, and then she sets her phone down on the bed without a word.

The ideal ambiance and our perfect distance. Our previously pleasant Saturday was being colored in shades of gray.

"Is everything okay?"

I ask with a casual tone, to which Sendai-san responds with an equally casual facade.

"I'm fine, but things aren't okay."

"...What do you mean?"

"It's my sister who's not okay. She's got a cold," she explains.

Her voice is flat, devoid of readable emotion.

I can't fathom what she’s thinking right now.

"Does she have a fever?"

"Yeah. In simple terms, my parents messaged me to check on her because she's down with a cold and can’t move. They're pretty overprotective of my sister."

I almost ask if she's going, but change the question.

"Do you keep in touch with your sister?"

"Not really, but I've received a message from her since coming here."

"Is that so?"

Going to see her sister isn't necessary.

Sendai-san has the right to make that choice.

Considering she has never gone back to the house where her parents live even once, there seems to be no need for her to visit her sister either.

Surely, Sendai-san’s sister has friends and others to lean on when unwell, and it's possible her parents are just worrying excessively, even as those friends are already helping her.

So, Sendai-san can just ignore matters concerning her sister.

A common cold is hardly a cause for alarm.

She can simply disregard the message instructing her to check up on her.

I ought to gently encourage her by saying, "You don't need to go."

"...Sendai-san."

"Do you want to watch the rest of the movie?"

Her gentle voice tickles my ear, prompting me to grab onto her clothing.

"I'm not interested. I think you should go check on your sister."

I personally believe there's no need for her to go.

But perhaps Sendai-san's sister, who I've never met, is just as prone to catching colds as Sendai-san, and like the times I've seen Sendai-san suffer, she might be struggling.

"Is your sister's place far?"

"It's not nearby."

Sendai-san answers without meeting my gaze.

"Even if it's not close, you should go. Being sick and alone is never fun."

An empty house.

Plans made, only to be broken.

Even becoming accustomed to such solitude and expecting such pain, I've thought about how having someone around during times of fever and headache would have been a comfort.

Even understanding that measuring body temperature can be avoided to ignore a fever and knowing pain can be masked with medicine, there were still days when those small comforts were out of reach.

I get up and retrieve a key case from my bag.

"Sendai-san, this is meant to protect important keys, right?"

Showing her the key case, Sendai-san nods.

"I'll lend you my key with the case. Since the dog seems stronger, we'll swap just for today. So, go back to your room and get your keys."

Sendai-san's key case is adorned with a cat, but my key is guarded by a dog. Though either case could protect a key, Sendai-san had said that the dog would always safeguard my key.

Thus, the dog key case must inevitably return to me.

While it may not be as significant as swearing on the earrings, I don't want to release Sendai-san, who is in the middle of fulfilling

her promise to me, without any kind of promise.

"Hazuki, promise me you'll return my key and the case."

I place my key case in her hand and touch the necklace around her neck.

"Got it. I'll be back soon to return the key and the case. Sorry for cutting the movie short."

"We can watch movies anytime."

"You're right. That's true."

Sendai-san says in a small voice, before gently grasping both my hand and the necklace.

The Place Sendai-san Should Be (III)

Part 377

I can only speculate about what Sendai-san truly wanted to do.

Without asking her, I let her go, leaving me uncertain of her feelings —whether she didn't want to leave at all, or if she would have gone regardless of my prompting.

I wait for Sendai-san without understanding anything.

Seated on the same floor where we were watching a movie, I gaze at the key case in my palm.

Inside the cat-embossed key case is the key to this house, identical to the key I gave to Sendai-san.

Until I received the key case, I hadn't given it much thought, but the keys are something we share, tethering us to this house. Without them, we wouldn't be able to remain in the same place.

I grip the key case tightly.

This house is the only place where Sendai-san should return to, and she's never failed to come back. She's never lost her key either. As long as the key case protects it, that shouldn't change.

I lean against the bed and look at the table.

The tablet we used to watch the movie catches my eye, prompting me to turn off the power to prevent unexpected zombie sounds. I place the screen face down on the table, then cover it with the black cat plushie from the bookshelf, sealing everything away.

The zombies must be kept locked inside the tablet.

"Take care of it," I murmur.

The cat won't respond with a "meow," but the moon necklace around its neck glints.

— I shouldn't have watched that horror movie.

I was complacent, assuming Sendai-san would be beside me until morning.

In the past, I'd have anticipated such unforeseen circumstances and avoided watching horror movies entirely. Fear gnaws at the psyche, conjuring nonexistent illusions.

Whether it's moments after watching, that night, or the next day...

Even as time passes, there are occasional moments when one senses the presence of something that exists only on the screen, or glimpses a shadow. These unexpected reminders keep lingering fear bubbling within me, rendering even bright places unsettling.

It's been less than an hour since Sendai-san left the house, yet I already sense something that shouldn't be there behind me.

I hate this.

I glance at my phone that rests where Sendai-san sat.

No messages or calls.

Hunching my shoulders, I clutch the key case while hugging my knees.

Why did Sendai-san's sister have to catch a cold at a time like this?

"It's scary," I whisper, looking at the black cat.

Sendai-san rarely talks about her family, so I know nothing about her sister.

Is she similar to Sendai-san, who confines herself to bed when sick?

If I knew, I could imagine how ill her sister is, and predict when Sendai-san might return.

For now, I know nothing—not even where her sister lives.

Sendai-san said she'd return as soon as she could, but didn't specify

a time. I wish to believe she won't stay out until late at night, but if Sendai-san's sister gets sick like her, she might not be home until morning.

I exhale deeply.

I berate myself for not asking about anything despite my desire to know more about Sendai-san. There'd been ample time to inquire about her sister before today.

Yet that's all it is—a thought. Considering my own situation, asking isn't easy. When you ask someone about themselves, you must be prepared to answer similar questions.

I'm not ready for that.

Surely, I wouldn't be able to answer if asked about my mother. Because I'd prefer to leave buried memories undisturbed.

Mom spoke fondly of Dad and was always kind. During many nights when Dad was away, she was always there for me.

Sharing such stories with someone means recalling memories of Mom, which also involves remembering things better left forgotten.

If Mom were truly kind, she'd always have come home. She wouldn't leave my elementary school self crying alone in a big empty house without comforting me.

I would have to go through the process of accepting these facts that I don't want to acknowledge.

It's better not to speak of such trivial matters.

I tightly grip the key case.

Mom used to cry a lot, but more than anything, I don't want to recall how I cried even more than she did.

I'd rather remember other things.

Sendai-san talking about winter vacation since the morning.

Sendai-san earnestly researching our day-trip plans on her phone.

Sendai-san watching a horror movie beside me.

On the tablet, the zombies rampage—

The recent scenes resurface, rekindling my fear. I check the time on my phone.

It's already time for dinner, and I sigh.

There's nothing to eat in this room. For dinner, I must go to the shared space.

After some thought, I stand up.

I bring some comedy manga from the bookshelf and place them beside my phone.

There are no ghosts in this house, nor do zombies appear. However, I'm not very hungry, so I decide to read manga instead of eating dinner.

One book, two books, three books in—none make me laugh.

I continue fetching books from the shelf, reading four books, five books.

I even try a novel, but the words don't reach my mind.

Time passes slowly, and my phone buzzes.

"Sorry, I'll be late."

A brief message from Sendai-san. I quickly type back, "Got it."

But the time of the moon and stars has arrived, and the view outside my window is pitch-black.

Midnight approaches.

Before living with Sendai-san, I was always alone. I'm well-versed in enduring fearful nights.

Tonight, the tablet is sealed by the black cat, and I have Sendai-san's

key case. Thus, I should be fine, but my back remains hunched, refusing to straighten.

In such times, burrowing into the futon and sleeping until morning is best, but today, even the futon's darkness seems threatening.

I fetch my blanket from the bed and wrap it around myself on the floor.

Typically, feeling something against my back offers comfort, and being wrapped in something soft calms me somewhat, but not today.

Still wrapped in the blanket, I get up and open the door.

I switch on the shared space's light, standing before Sendai-san's room.

I press my hand against the door.

I want to go inside.

I sense it'll be less frightening than being in my own room.

However, it's not right to intrude into someone else's room without permission.

Just as I wish to keep the sleeping black cat on my bed a secret, Sendai-san might also have things she wants to keep hidden.

I glance back at my room, the door left ajar.

Right now, the black cat is on top of the tablet.
The crocodile is near where I was sitting.
I hold Sendai-san's key case and my phone.

The crying version of myself is nowhere to be found.

I wasn't left behind.
Even if I'm scared, if I wait, Sendai-san will return.

I close my room's door and sit in front of Sendai-san's room.

Since she has to return the exchanged key case to me, there's no way

she won't come back.

Deep in my heart there is a part of me that can't believe in Sendai-san, but there is also a part of me that does believe in her. These two parts of me are always clashing and fighting.

Right now, the part of me that trusts Sendai-san is winning.

Hopefully, for a long time from now, I want to live with this feeling.

—So, please come back soon.

Please.

Chapter 130

Heading to Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 378

"I'm heading out now."

I called out to my half-asleep sister as I left the house. I had spent more time there than I had anticipated and was keen not to miss the last train of the night. I hurried toward the station.

If anything happens, make sure to contact me.

Though I felt that I should add such reassurance for my sister, who lived alone, the words wouldn't come out.

The road was cloaked in darkness, different from when I had arrived. I stopped and glanced back.

Since I became a university student, my sister had reached out, but I could only reply with words more curt than those I often receive from Miyagi.

And today, once again, I hadn't really spoken with my sister.

As a result, I had no idea what she was thinking, how she had lived, or why she had invited me into her room today.

I looked back at the road leading to my sister's house. Despite being illuminated by street lamps, it seemed unusually dark. The buildings and sidewalks felt foreign to me.

I glanced at the key case in my bag. There was no cat there, but I had the odd feeling that the dog belonging to Miyagi let out a small bark, prompting me to look forward.

Thinking about what I hadn't done wouldn't solve anything now.

I moved briskly to catch the train. Departing from my sister's place, I headed toward the home where Miyagi awaited.

I nearly sprinted, eager to return to Miyagi.

Breathless, I reached the station and steadied my breathing. I passed through the ticket gate, managing to catch the last train.

The train was sparse with passengers. Not wanting to sit, I stood swaying as it traveled.

My sister's weary face crossed my mind, and I clutched my skirt.

She had been sitting quietly in a room filled with books, with no sign of contacting any friends. Alone in the room, without lying in bed, just sitting there.

It reminded me of Miyagi, who would also try to ignore being unwell, refusing to sleep or seek help, robbing me of the option to simply leave medicine and food and head home. Moreover, when I urged her to check her temperature, the thermometer read thirty-nine degrees, making it even harder to leave.

In times like these, relying on a friend would be sensible.

I had that thought, but if it were me feeling unwell, I wouldn't turn to my friends. My sister, as I knew her, would have made the same choice.

I thought she had become someone else entirely, but parts of her remained unchanged, it seemed.

There are likely other unchanged aspects, but I don't feel inclined to find out now. It was merely a reunion after a long time for me and my sister. Right now, that's all there is to our relationship.

There is no magic that breaks the curse our parents cast in an instant.

I know that pumpkins don't become carriages and mice don't turn into horses.

But I also know people can change even without magic. It may not happen in two or three hours, but over two or three years, change is

definitely possible. Although we can't return to who we were, perhaps we can become new versions of ourselves.

The issue is that it requires effort, and the grown-up me isn't inclined to make that effort, even though I understand my sister isn't at fault. I understand, but my emotions don't align.

—My sister.

When we were kids, there wasn't much of a gap between us.

What my sister could do, I could eventually manage too.

That's why I was always able to follow in her footsteps.

We weren't like opposing sun and moon sisters, but more like stars and the moon, similar yet distinct.

But being similar doesn't mean we're the same. I only misunderstood, thinking I could do everything she could. As we grew older, the things I couldn't do increased, and I learned that stars and moons are different.

Disappointment and despair.

Regret and remorse.

Every emerging feeling was negative, making me sigh.

Not that I wish I hadn't gone.

But I can't muster a positive outlook.

While swaying in the train, all I can think about is wanting to watch a movie with Miyagi or have more trivial conversations. Even while watching my troubled sister in that spare room, Miyagi lingered in my mind.

I'm heartless and callous.

The absence of worry for a sick person disgusts me.

I stared dazedly at the door. Opening and closing. Repeatedly, until I alighted from the train ride that felt longer than it was.

Outside the station, under the streetlights, I walked along the sidewalk toward the home I should return to.

The midnight city exaggerated every sound.

My footsteps echoed loudly, merging into the darkness.

Above me, the part of my name that Miyagi had taken, the moon, shone brightly. If it were brighter, I might be.able spot the leaf that’s also a part of me on the sidewalk. But right now, neither the moon nor leaves were visible to me. Focused only on what's ahead, I moved forward.

Toward home.

Faster, faster.

To Miyagi.

The four-leaf clover at my chest swayed.

For some reason, today, home seemed distant.

One minute felt like two, two like four.

I cut through the midnight thats seemed frozen in time, rhythmically moving my arms and legs.

Reaching home, climbing the stairs to the third floor.

At the door, I pulled out Miyagi's key case.

"I'm here."

Talking to the ever-well-behaved dog figurine, I unlocked the door.

"I'm home."

Locking up, I removed my shoes and headed to the shared space, opening the door.

It's bright. The lights are on. But Miyagi isn't here.

She shouldn't have left the lights on, but no one's sitting in the chair, and no one’s in the kitchen.

I took a couple of steps and paused.

"...Eh?"

There was a bundle on the floor.

Wrapped in a towel blanket, it was unmistakably Miyagi.

Probably, undoubtedly collapsed.

"Miyagi!?"

I couldn't understand why Miyagi lay collapsed in the shared space, especially in front of my room.

Confused about everything, I rushed over.

"Miyagi!"

I tossed my bag aside and pulled off the towel blanket.

Her eyes stayed closed, refusing to open.

I hesitated to shake her awake, stopping my hand. Not knowing why she collapsed, I thought it might be best not to move her carelessly.

"Miyagi, Miyagi!"

When I lightly patted her cheeks, a small groan escaped her lips, making my heart leap. Relief at her consciousness mixed with panic at how unsteady she was, causing my heart to pound wildly.

"Miyagi, are you okay? Do you recognize me?"

Though it wasn’t a volume fit for midnight, I asked urgently, and Miyagi’s eyelids twitched.

"...Sen... dai-san?"

Alongside her hoarse voice, her eyes opened and slowly found their focus on me.

"Are you okay? Did you hit your head? Let me know if anything hurts."

Questions cluttered in my head, and words jumbled in my mouth. Still, I couldn't remain silent, and I let the words flow out as they came.

"My body hurts," Miyagi murmured, prompting me to grasp her shoulder.

"Where does it hurt? Should I call an ambulance?"

"Ambulance?"

"Yes. You're not well, right?"

Otherwise, she wouldn't be collapsed here like this.

I didn't know when she started feeling unwell, but there was a nagging thought that perhaps, even by the time I left the house, she was already in pain, which led her to this state. The thought made my heart pound thunderously.

I tightened my grip on her shoulder.

"Ouch," she exclaimed, and I asked, "Where does it hurt?"

"My shoulder. Let go," she pleaded.

She slapped my shoulder-gripping hand, and I quickly released her.

"I was just sleeping."

Her voice came out dry and crumbly like a slice of stale bread.

"Sleeping? Here on the floor? Weren't you actually collapsed?"

"I really was just sleeping, so it's fine," she insisted.

Saying that, Miyagi began to sit up.

Our eyes met.

Miyagi moved her arm towards me, then hastily retreated under the cover of the towel blanket I had removed. Feeling somewhat concerned, I grabbed her arm. With a gentle tug, her hand emerged from the blanket, releasing a key case that fell to the floor.

"Welcome back," her disgruntled voice reached me before I could speak, reminding me of the words I hadn’t yet shared with her — the important ones.

"I'm home, Miyagi. Sorry for being late."

Tenderly.

I reached out and touched the plumeria earring adorning Miyagi's ear.

Heading to Miyagi (II)

Part 379

Slowly tracing the outline of her earring, I delicately caressed Miyagi's cheek.

"Sendai-san, exchange."

Miyagi muttered softly and pulled away from my touch, picking up the key case she had dropped and offering it to me.

I picked up my discarded bag from the floor and retrieved my own key case.

"Thank you for the dog."

I handed over the key case, making the exchange. The cat I received from her was greeted with a gentle "I'm home" before I tucked it into my bag.

"Miyagi, you said you were just sleeping earlier, but why were you sleeping here?"

As I voiced my question, Miyagi glared at the blanket on the floor rather than at me.

No answer came back. Silence descended, enveloping us in an almost tangible hush where we could hear the air itself.

Miyagi appeared to have collapsed right there on the floor.

The blanket that had covered her.

The cat key case that had slipped from her hand.

All of it lay before my room.

Piecing together the clues scattered in the shared space, I realized that Miyagi's earlier claim of "just sleeping" was not a lie.

Though relieved that she hadn't collapsed, the puzzle pieces gathered from the scene still didn't explain why she slept on the floor in front of my room, rather than a bed.

"Miyagi."

I called her name, hoping to solve this mystery, but received no reply. Miyagi remained silent, not even attempting to stand up.

She usually would have returned to her room by now, and her silence was also unexpected. Questions piled up.

I retraced my steps, trying to recall the sequence of events.

Leaving Miyagi at home, I had gone to see my sister.

Before that, we had watched a movie together.

It was a horror movie, which Miyagi wasn't fond of—

"Could it be that... you slept here because you were scared?"

"It's not like that."

Miyagi muttered in a low tone, pulling the blanket closer and distancing herself from me.

I knew from experience that Miyagi wouldn't answer in moments like these. Still, my wishful thoughts persisted in wanting an explanation.

Scared after watching the horror movie, Miyagi sought comfort near my room. She preferred being closer to me over staying in her own room. Yet, without entering my room uninvited, she remained at the door.

It was nothing more than a hopeful delusion, but I wished it were true.

"If it’s not that, then why did you sleep here?"

I moved closer the same distance Miyagi had retreated, lightly tugging on the blanket. She tugged back, responding in a curt voice, "Doesn't matter why."

"Tell me."

"There is no reason."

Her decisive tone forced me to abandon further questioning.

"Fine, but even without a reason, don’t sleep here. You'll catch a cold."

"I wasn’t sleeping. I was awake."

"Pretty sure you were asleep when I saw you."

Giving the blanket a stronger tug, Miyagi responded with a voice expressing utmost displeasure.

"I was awake at first."

"Well, yeah. Everyone is awake before they fall asleep."

As I said that, Miyagi suddenly released the blanket, pushing it towards me. It crumpled in my grasp, rather than returning to Miyagi.

"If you're going to sleep here, you might as well come into my room and sleep comfortably as much as you like. I'd rather not have you catching a cold sleeping outside my door."

If Miyagi had been sleeping outside my room because the horror movie had scared her, it was rather adorable.

However, it pained me to think that I had terrified her so much that she would sleep on the floor outside my room.

I should have returned sooner.

Even if the reason she slept outside my room wasn't fear, I had left Miyagi, who dislikes horror movies, alone after making her watch one, which must have been unsettling.

I may not have meant to prioritize my sister, but I left Miyagi waiting too long.

"When did you come back, Sendai-san?"

Ignoring the invitation to enter my room at will, Miyagi changed the subject. Given my late return, I had an obligation to answer.

"Just now. My sister's condition was worse than I thought."

"Is everything okay?"

"Probably, yeah. I fed her and made sure she took her medicine."

"That’s not what I meant. I'm asking about you, Sendai-san"

"Eh? Me?"

"Are you okay, Sendai-san?"

Surprised by her serious tone, neither quiet nor low, I looked at Miyagi.

There were no wrinkles on her brow.

Our eyes met, and she didn't seem displeased.

It was unexpected.

Instead of being worried about my sister, Miyagi was concerned about me.

Placing the blanket aside, I carefully tried to reassure the most important person in my life, who is living in something important, that they wouldn’t need to worry anymore.

"I'm fine. Because you’re here, Miyagi."

Without Miyagi, I'm not sure I could have remained composed with my sister. The feelings of always comparing myself to her and speaking unthinkable thoughts might have overtaken me.

No, I probably wouldn’t have gone to my sister at all. And if anything had happened to her, I might have regretted it deeply, wanting to abandon everything.

But because of Miyagi, none of those things happened.

I no longer need to compare myself to anyone or aspire to be like my sister.

I should just be the "me" that belongs to Miyagi.

"Thank you, Miyagi."

Brushing my lips against her cheek, I ran my fingers through her dark hair.

"I'm not involved in this."

"You are."

For me, "Miyagi Shiori" is the place I wish to return to.

That’s why I could go to my sister.

I wasn't an outstanding person, but I did what needed to be done for my sister and returned home unentangled by shadows.

"...Hazuki."

Her soft voice reached my ears, and her hand touched the necklace around my neck.

Her fingers traced the chain, caressing the four-leaf clover pendant and pulling on it.

The necklace dug into my neck, causing me to lean towards Miyagi.

As her face drew closer, our lips met.

Shocked, I looked at Miyagi, whose gaze had shifted away as her forehead pressed against my shoulder.

"If it's now, then it's fine."

Miyagi mumbled incomprehensible words, prompting me to respond.

"Eh?"

"The promise from before."

"Promise?"

After I repeated her words dumbly, Miyagi whispered so quietly I almost missed it.

"...We made another promise, remember? If now is okay, then maybe..."

On the day Miyagi had asked me to deal with the birthday party that Mio had planned, we made a promise. It was a promise that I could embrace someone precious within something important, a promise I eagerly anticipated.

"Miya—"

My voice was suddenly interrupted by a sound coming from somewhere.

"Eh?"

Instead of the "gi" sound of Miyagi's name, a hapless noise escaped my lips.

The sound that cut me off was a low "growl" that resonated with enough force that there wasn't time to call out her name, causing my hand to move toward its source.

Miyagi's stomach.

Though it no longer made noise, I gently touched it.

"Are you hungry, by any chance?"

I rubbed the area around her stomach that had emitted the sound akin to hunger pangs signaling for attention. Miyagi lifted her head from my shoulder.

"It wasn’t mine. It was your stomach, Sendai-san."

Saying this, Miyagi peeled my hand away from her stomach and firmly pressed it against mine.

"It was definitely your stomach, Miyagi."

"It wasn’t. I’m not hungry."

"Did you eat?"

"I did."

"What did you have?"

"…Something."

Miyagi offered a non-answer and then proceeded to press against my stomach.

Her words and actions were so childish that I couldn't help but burst out laughing.

Indeed, this is where I belong, and I need Miyagi.

"I haven’t eaten either, so how about we eat together now?"

I had ensured my sister ate, but I'd returned home without doing the same for myself. I hadn't even noticed my own hunger while I was away, but now that things had settled, I realized just how hungry I was.

"…If we're going to eat, then I'll take back what I said earlier."

Truthfully, I'd feel it was a shame.

Even on an empty stomach, I wanted to hold Miyagi close.

However, if Miyagi was also hungry, my priorities shifted.

"That's fine. I'll prepare something. Let's eat together."

"And the promise?"

"It's okay if we wait until you're ready to agree again."

"I'm tired of saying it myself."

"Then, let's make it happen tomorrow."

"Why do you get to decide that?"

"If that's how you feel, you can decide."

I smiled at her while holding her hand, and although she replied with an irked "you're annoying," she didn't pull away.

"…I'll put it on hold for now."

Miyagi muttered, then added, "Let's go eat."

"Hey, Miyagi. Let's do it tomorrow."

"I'll think about it tomorrow."

"I trust that you won't say no, Miyagi."

As I stood up to prepare our much-delayed dinner, a low voice encouraged me to hurry, saying, "Make it quick."

Heading to Miyagi (III)

Part 380

'Thanks for yesterday. My fever has gone down.'

Seeing the message on my phone that woke me up instantly made me wide awake.

—My sister.

I wish I could pretend I didn't see it.

But it would be cruel to ignore my sister who took the initiative to reach out.

She's just recovering from an illness.

Even if it's not what I want to see first thing in the morning, and even if our relationship isn't in the best state, I should at least send a reply.

'Okay.'

After debating for a bit, I send off a short, rather insignificant reply.

I exhale deeply.

I definitely could have responded better.

Maybe because I thought about it too much, sending just a simple word somehow exhausted me. I placed my phone by the wall and turned to my side.

"...Shiori."

I utter the name of the person lying beside me and reach out my hand.

I smooth her black hair and tug it lightly.

On my bed lies Miyagi.

That’s because after we had a late dinner of pasta with retort-packaged meat sauce last night, we both fell asleep without keeping our promise of staying up till morning.

Of course, Miyagi had complained, "You said we’d stay up till morning," but I was utterly exhausted, and despite her complaints, she fell asleep as soon as she got in bed. Now, it's late in the morning, and she's still asleep.

"Shiori."

I trace her lips with my fingertips.

This way of calling her might earn me complaints if she were awake, but since she's asleep, I can freely say it as many times as I want.

Shiori, Shiori, Shiori.

I call her again and again.

Miyagi doesn’t wake up.

A peaceful time without complaints passes slowly.

Such quiet moments aren't so bad, but I still prefer it when Miyagi is awake. Even if her brow is furrowed or her voice is low, I want her to look at me with open eyes and call my name.

"Shiori."

Calling her loudly, I place a kiss on her lips.

Even so, she doesn't wake up, so I hug her tightly. "Hmm, what is it?" I hear a drowsy voice as she stirs.

"Good morning, Shiori."

"Mornin'."

A small voice comes from within my arms.

"Are you still sleepy?"

"Yeah."

A hazy voice replies, and when I ask, "It's almost ten, do you still want to sleep, Shiori?" Miyagi pushes her body away from my embrace.

"I'll get up. And it's not Shiori, it's Miyagi."

"Okay, okay."

I catch Miyagi's hand and kiss her fingertips.

"I didn't say you could do that."

"True."

I respond with a smile and press my lips against her palm.

"S-Sendai-san!"

With a low voice, she pushes my forehead, breaking our connection.

"What is it, Miyagi?"

"You're annoying."

She state in a clear voice, and I look at the owner of the voice.

"Aren't you being rude?"

"No, I'm not. More importantly, did your sister contact you?"

Miyagi, now undoubtedly awake, asks calmly.

"...She did."

Talking about such an unpleasant subject first thing in the morning weighs heavy on my words.

"Is she feeling better?"

"Apparently, yeah."

"That's good."

Miyagi replies softly, bumping her forehead against mine, and her warmth seeps gently into me.

"Right. Yes, it is."

That's good.

It's good that her fever has gone down.

—That’s what I should have said.

That must be what I should have responded to my sister with, much better than just "Okay."

My feelings towards my sister, crafted by our parents, blinded me from seeing such obvious words.

Still, the relationship with my sister, hardened by time, won't easily crumble, and finding the courage to send a new message isn't something I can muster today.

But even if I can't do it today, I hope that someday I'll be able respond with better words.

"Thank you, Miyagi."

I touch her black hair gently, stroking it softly.

"For what?"

"For whatever."

I smile gently and add, "Shall we have breakfast now?" and Miyagi replies, "I'm going to get changed," before leaving the room.

The empty spot left on the bed is warm and comfortable from the lingering body heat as I roll over and press my cheek to it.

This is where I belong.

While I wish I could stay like this forever, reality calls, so I get up.

I wash my face, change, and have breakfast.

On this Sunday, slightly different from the usual, I spend the day just as I normally would. I pour tea into our black cat and calico cat mugs and we watch the rest of yesterday's movie in my room.

Miyagi hasn't suddenly developed a liking for horror films overnight, and she stays huddled beside me, peering at the tablet.

As the end credits roll, Miyagi voices her complaints, and after watching another movie, we have a late lunch. A game of rock-paper-scissors determined who cleans up, and Miyagi ends up washing the dishes.

Time flows gently, and we soon return to my room with glasses of orange juice.

"What shall we watch next?"

Miyagi asks naturally, holding the tablet, but she's forgotten something important.

I sip my orange juice and look at her.

"There’s something left unfinished. What do you want to do about it?"

"Was there any movie we didn't finish?"

Miyagi looks puzzled.

"—The promise. Let’s continue the conversation we postponed. It was just yesterday, so you remember, right?"

When I squeeze Miyagi’s hand sitting next to me, she flinches and looks away.

She definitely remembers.

The promise that Miyagi mentioned, saying, “If it's now, then it's fine,” got interrupted by our hunger, and when I said, “Tomorrow,” it was left on hold.

“It’s still bright outside though.”

Just as Miyagi mentioned, the sun was shining outside, yet she kept her gaze on the floor rather than looking out the window.

“It’s not time for it to get dark yet.”

“You’re such a pervert,” she mutters, releasing her hand from mine and pushing my shoulder.

“Are you not going to?”

The decision lies with Miyagi.

Not with me.

“Miyagi.”

I don’t intend to force her, so if she says no, the conversation ends here. It can be postponed again, and Miyagi can just bring it up when she's ready to give an answer.

“Do you want to watch a movie instead?”

I ask Miyagi, who's still avoiding my eyes, and her gaze remains fixed on the floor. As I reach for the tablet on the table to prepare another movie, a small voice perks up.

“...You decide, Sendai-san”

Thump, my heart beats loudly.

I swallow the “eh?” that almost escapes my mouth.

There’s only one answer.

“I’ll close the curtains then.”

Miyagi doesn't say anything else.

I stand up, draw the curtains, and seal this room from the outside world. I sit on the bed, turning off the lights, and Miyagi comes to sit next to me as I touch her cheek.

“…Will you be the one doing it, Sendai-san?”

She says in a soft voice, and I ask, "Do you mind?"

Miyagi's hand clutches my clothes.

Yet, she remains silent.

"Today, I want to keep my promise of cherishing you even more than on your birthday. Can I touch you, not just on your cheek, but other places too?"

I lean in, bringing my lips close, and touch where I belong.

On her forehead, her nose, her lips.

I kiss her and gently push on her shoulders.

Slowly, her body reclines, and Miyagi’s back touches the bed.

"Sendai-san, take off your clothes."

My clothes, which were still being held, were pulled insistently.

"What about you, Miyagi?"

“…You’re the one who should undress, Sendai-san.”

"Alright. But why don’t you take yours off too? It's dark, no one can see."

I lift Miyagi's shirt, resting my hand gently on her stomach.

Chapter 131

Only My Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 381

"If you can't take it off yourself, should I do it for you?"

As Sendai-san's voice reaches my ears, I grab the hand she's placed on my stomach.

"You don't need to do something like that."

"I already told you, it's dark anyway, I can't see anything."

Even though that's clearly not true, Sendai-san says it as if it were.

The lights are off in this room, and the curtains are drawn, but it's not pitch black. Enough light seeps in from the outside world for me to make out the faint outline of Sendai-san's face.

"I can see you."

"Isn't it just your imagination?"

"It's definitely not my imagination."

"Miyagi, just pretend it's all in your head."

"You're telling me to pretend, so it's not actually dark, right?"

I remove her hand from my body.

Sendai-san is relentlessly persistent.

However, without such persistence, today wouldn't have been the day to fulfill the promise. A promise that was postponed yesterday due to my stomach's untimely growl, despite me having mustered the courage to say "If it's now, it's fine." I don't regret giving Sendai-

san the right to decide.

Seeing Sendai-san finally come back yesterday made me realize she should be by my side. I feel the same today.

"Miyagi, do you remember the other day?"

Sendai-san changes the subject, and I ask back, "What other day?"

"When you did it to me, wasn't the room bright? And I'm pretty sure I took off my clothes."

"...That was that, and this is this. Besides, I don't need to take them off for this."

"I don't need to take them off either."

"Sendai-san, take them off."

"I told you before, it's okay."

In the room unable to be completely hidden by darkness, Sendai-san sits up, and as she does, I follow, pulled up by her, as she gently clasps my hand.

"Miyagi, undo the buttons."

Under her guidance, my hand is pressed against her chest.

The sensation of buttons against my palm makes my heart race.

One by one, slowly.

I begin undoing the buttons on her blouse.

Sensing Sendai-san's gaze, I look up and our eyes meet.

This room doesn't possess enough darkness to conceal everything.

I want to complain, but instead, I silently continue with my task.

I remove her blouse, then her camisole, and gently touch the four-leaf clover that adorns her chest.

"I'm nervous," she murmurs, and I deny it.

"You're definitely not."

"I am. It's been a while since we've done something like this."

"It would be a problem if it hasn't."

"I wouldn't mind."

She embraces me with a quiet voice, pulling me close.

As I wrap my arms around her back, her warmth envelops me. I slowly glide my hands over her smooth skin and bury my face in the curve of her neck.

"Does it feel good?"

She asks, and I reply affirmatively, "It feels good."

Everything about Sendai-san feels good.

The warmth from her skin through my palms feels good, and the familiar smell of her shampoo is comforting. But it's not enough, so I reach for her bra clasp.

"You can take it off," she whispers beside my ear, gently biting at my neck.

"I was going to without being told."

The only thing Sendai-san could decide on was "whether to do it today or not." She has no right to decide anything else.

After unclasping what was beneath my fingers, I gently push her away, removing the covering hiding her upper body and touch the curves beneath.

As soft as I remember from before.

When my fingertips trace her outline, her body quivers.

"Miyagi's touch feels good."

During moments like these, Sendai-san seems to lack any sense of embarrassment.

In the past, she surprised me by saying things no normal person would, like when I once asked how good it felt, she openly replied "Better than when I do it myself." She even guided me to the places that felt best for her.

Ears, collarbones, chest.

And many more.

I slide my hands across her skin, tracing along her ribs, and press against her chest.

"Miyagi, don't you want to be closer to me?"

Tenderly combing my hair, her invitation draws me in with a voice she doesn't usually use. Without waiting for my answer, her hands find their way beneath my shirt, pressing gently against my back.

"I want to get closer to you, Miyagi."

There's no moving any closer.

We're closer than when we're eating or sitting side by side watching a movie. Closer than anyone else could possibly get.

So what Sendai-san is saying is strange.

But even when she's shed all her clothing, there's still something that exists between us. The 'thing' that can only be removed by my decision. Should it vanish, I can be closer to Sendai-san.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san's hands trail slowly down my spine. She gently strokes my shoulder blades and grips my waist.

"Come closer."

Her voice, after leaving me all alone yesterday, resonates deeply, penetrating me, as her warmth captures the tiny part of myself hidden away within.

"That's an unfair way to put it."

Because I was alone yesterday, I yearn to be closer to Sendai-san.

I want to strip away the barriers, and touch Sendai-san, who is softer and warmer than the hard floor of the shared space.

"I'll take it off for you," she says, softly tracing my cheek and gripping the hem of my T-shirt.

Reflexively, I hold her hand to stop her.

"You erotic demon, Sendai-san. I never said it was okay."

"You didn't say it was okay, but you didn't say no either."

Her pleasant voice rings in my ears, and I peel her hand away from my shirt.

"Turn around... and don't look this way. Also, Sendai-san, take off your skirt."

"Alright, but you need to take this off, too, Miyagi."

She nudges the jeans covering my legs, and when I reply "I'll decide," Sendai-san obediently turns her back.

I remove my shirt and look down at my denim jeans.

Even in the past, I didn't take them off, and it hadn't been an issue, so there's no need to today either. But Sendai-san's warmth was so comforting. Lessening the barriers between us might let me feel her warmth more.

"Miyagi, are you ready now?"

Sendai-san asks, and I respond, "Not yet."

I inhale, then exhale.

With trembling hands, I undo the button on my jeans.

I pull down the zipper but pause momentarily.

I clench my hands tightly and slowly peel off the jeans.

"Miyagi. I'm turning around now."

On the bed, tugging at the towel blanket, I lie down. With my back to Sendai-san, I burrow underneath and hear her call my name again.

"Do as you like."

My voice comes out low, and I bite my lip.

I clutch the blanket tightly and feel a gentle tap from Sendai-san, who has apparently turned towards me.

"I'm going to take the blanket off."

Knowing that words like "no" are meaningless if I'm intent on keeping my promise, I stay silent. As I take a deep breath and exhale, the towel blanket is tugged, and almost reflexively, I pull it back.

"Miyagi. Let go."

Hearing her voice, sweet as cotton candy, I release my hold. The towel blanket is pulled away again, and the armor that protected me disappears.

"...Miyagi, what about your underwear?"

She asks while her hand trails along the strap of my bra.

"Absolutely not," I respond, still facing away.

"Even though I've taken mine off?" she challenges, prompting me to turn my head towards her.

"Not all of it."

While Sendai-san's upper body is uncovered, her skirt is the only thing gone from her lower half.

"If I take it off, will you?"

"I won't."

"Miyagi, you're so stingy," she mutters, and I hear the bed creak as she lies down.

She embraces me from behind, and her soft form touches my back, sending my heart racing. Her arms wrap tightly around me, erasing any gaps between us.

Arms, chest, waist, legs—all of Sendai-san's skin presses against mine, and though there's still something covering me, she's closer than ever.

If I were to remove my underwear...

If all that covers me were to vanish, I could feel even closer to Sendai-san.

I understand that, but I lack the courage.

Even though what protects me is flimsy, if it were all gone, I'd feel overwhelmingly vulnerable.

I lay my hand over hers.

My heart beats frantically, and I think I can hear the impossible sound of blood flowing. The places where we touch are intensely hot, yet I can't tell if my feet feel hot or cold. My awareness focuses solely on where Sendai-san and I overlap, making it hard to breathe.

"Miyagi."

The way she softly calls my name tickles.

"Turn this way; I want to kiss you."

"No."

"Miyagi."

As she spoke, Sendai-san draws even closer. Her fingertips trace my lips and stroke my neck. Her lips touch my shoulder, and her hand glides over my collarbone. When her tongue traces my spine, the

sensation tickles, making me squirm, and she undoes my bra clasp.

As I'm about to protest, her hand slides inside the bra, brushing over my chest.

"Sendai-san, don't," I say, though she seemingly hears, her fingertips still graze the center of my chest. In an attempt to evade, I turn my body towards her and cover her eyes.

"I can't see," she grumbles.

"That's the point."

"Why?"

"Looking at me isn't interesting."

"If Miyagi tells me not to look, I'll try not to, but I don't find looking at you boring. Actually, I want to look."

"Sendai-san, quit talking nonsense at times like these."

"Then, do you want me to talk like this at other times?"

"Of course not." I declare firmly, as she places her hand over mine that's covering her eyes.

"Miyagi. I'll close my eyes, so let go."

"Are you really closing them?"

"I already have."

"Really?"

"Really."

Though my view, shaded like faint ink, is unclear, I sense her lips forming a smile. Wanting to see her smile, I move my hand away.

A gentle, floating smile.

Our gazes intertwine.

I nudge my foot against Sendai-san.

"You're looking."

"This way, I can't see."

In a room tainted with shadows, she moves closer.

The distance between us quickly closes and our lips meet.

Though I had always been watching Sendai-san, I can only remember her beauty, leaving me uncertain if her eyes are open. Even if they were open, I see nothing.

All I can see is a part of her beautiful face in my view.

When Sendai-san pulls away, she immediately returns, kissing softly time and again, before her tongue ventures tentatively into my mouth.

Kisses like this were once off-putting, but familiarity with the mingled heat now leads me to no longer mind her tongue touching mine. Instead, I find myself yearning for her, and my tongue moves of its own volition.

When attempting to entwine with her further, she teases me, making me pursue.

Our tongues touch and intertwine.

Overwhelmed, I forget how to breathe, suffocating.

Pushing against her shoulder briefly parts us, but she quickly returns to capture my lips.

Her tongue parts my lips, grazing my teeth.

Desperate for oxygen, I gently bite her tongue, which prompts her to withdraw to a comfortable distance, allowing me to take a deep breath.

"Oh, by the way, I have something to tell you."

As Sendai-san informs me, I avert my gaze, not wanting to meet

hers.

"You mentioned wanting me to report to you when I found something I like, right? I found it."

"What is it?"

Though her gaze unsettles me, my curiosity about the 'thing she likes' makes me urge her to continue.

"Hazuki."

"...Your name?"

"Yes. Because Miyagi gave me a necklace, and 'Hazuki' became a name that only Miyagi gave me.—So now I like my name."

The necklace I gave her comes into view.

A four-leaf clover complementing the moon necklace guarded by the black cat to form "Hazuki."

Reaching over, I stroke it gently.

—My only Sendai Hazuki.

I draw her close and press a kiss to her lips.

"Shiori," she calls softly, "Call me Hazuki."

"...Hazuki," I respond.

"Please keep calling me that for now."

I can't answer.

Yet, Sendai-san says nothing more as she caresses my cheek.

Then, her hand slides to my neck, as she gently nibbles at my collarbone.

Something warm and soft presses against me and moves slowly downward. Her gentle lips crawl along my skin, coaxing unspoken sounds from me. Her hand presses below my ribs, grazing my waist.

The soft caress makes me lift my chin, and an involuntary voice escapes.

"Let me hear your voice more," she whispers near my ear as I grab her shoulders.

A delicate bite to my neck causes my body to shiver.

Her tongue flicks against my ear, nipping at the lobe.

"Nngh," I sigh, unable to suppress the raspy noise, lacking the time to bite my lip.

"Shiori, you're cute."

"Shut up."

Wishing to silence her unnecessary words, her tongue teasing my ear forces me to cover my own mouth.

It's infuriating.

Her hand trails up my hip, exploring my ribcage. Shifting my displaced bra, she presses her palm against my chest, causing me to tremble. Without speaking, her hand moves slowly, as if to explore the contours of my chest.

She remains silent, but I understand what's happening.

Her fingertips graze a part of me I don't want to be touched.

My body won't obey my will.

When Sendai-san moves, my body reacts on its own, revealing things I'd rather keep hidden from her. My vocal chords move without my control, preventing me from protesting.

"It’s okay."

Spoken gently, her words allow me to exhale.

Yet, as she gently strokes the hardened center of my chest, I suck in a breath.

Being touched by Sendai-san in such a near-naked state makes this act feel significant.

"Shiori."

The way she calls my name dissolves my rationality, prompting me to sink my teeth gently into her shoulder.

This act we're engaging in is not something we need to do.

We're doing it solely to keep a promise, without any deeper meaning.

I wish for Sendai-san to remain close, because of her delayed return yesterday, which was her fault. Since Sendai-san belongs here, this shouldn’t be a special occasion.

I grasp at the tail end of my reason, pulling it close, reminding myself.

"Shiori, you're cute."

The words I denied hearing before echo again.

Sendai-san is a liar.

Though she claimed she'd try not to look at me, she does, and I am not cute.

"Don't look."

I push gently against her shoulder.

"It's alright. I can't see that much anyway."

"Even seeing a little is too much."

Her hand continues its gentle movement across my chest, and though I grab it to try to draw her closer, it doesn't go as planned. Her face nears my chest, spilling her breath upon it. Her lips land softly there, and her tongue presses against a spot I don't wish her to see.

"S-Sendai-san!"

"Hazuki."

A gentle correction.

When I remain silent, her hand trails over my side. The lukewarm object continues to probe my chest, scattering kisses where they're unneeded.

"Hazuki, stop."

My reason melts away like ice under the sun's glare. The tail end disappears as I try to lock reason that’s becoming invisible in my hands.

"Isn't it okay?"

"No, stop."

"Then let me remind you of those places that felt good for me, Shiori."

"You already told me."

"I'll tell you again."

Her whisper melts into my ears, further dissolving my reason.

Her hand drifts, rubbing at my hip.

"Here felt good."

Her syrupy voice stirs my breath.

Her lips attach to my ribs, tracing her warmth along the bone.

"Here too."

To Sendai-san's voice, I reply, "Stop."

I reply again and again.

But she doesn't stop.

Her hands endlessly glide over my body, dropping kisses and repeating that it felt good.

Her voice pulls the Sendai-san within my mind outward, reminding me of her warmth, reactions, and how her experience overlaps with mine.

It feels good to be one with Sendai-san, who was changed under my hands. More sensations wash over me with every touch, disrupting my breathing, and sounds that I shouldn't make escape from my mouth.

"Shut...shut up."

In a husky voice, I try to halt her repeated affirmations, but her voice and touch don't stop.

"You don't need to say it every time."

"I want to. And I want you to feel even better, Shiori."

Before I knew it, Sendai-san's breathing had become irregular, and it was becoming closer to the voice I had heard her make in the past.

When I glide over Sendai-san's skin and slide my hand over hers, her response is, "Do it more."

Having cast away my shame, I nibble her shoulder, only to be bitten back. Her fingertips tease the center of my chest again, making my voice tremble.

"I said stop."

"It's okay."

Sendai-san's gaze makes me want to flee, but fleeing would mean I can't see her anymore.

I want to watch her forever.

Yet don't wish to be watched.

I reach for Sendai-san, capturing her.

Drawing her in, our body heat mixes together even more.

Her hand caresses lower over my side, slipping into my underwear without warning.

"Shiori."

Hearing my name, my breath pauses. Knowing what's happening at the tip of her fingers, I reflexively respond, "Stop."

My emotions, ignited by Sendai-san, spread through the fabric clinging to me. I don't want to sully the pristine Sendai-san, and I don't know what will happen to me if she touches me there.

"Shiori. I want to get closer."

Her voice, sweeter than French toast, resonates in my head.

"Don't look."

"Then hold me tightly so I can’t see."

Wrapping my arms around her back, my nails dig into her soft skin, gripping the flesh beneath.

Feeling like I used too much pressure, I relax my arms, as Sendai-san replies with a softly spoken, "Feels good, do it more."

"Pervert."

I dig my teeth into her neck, and the reply comes, "It's nothing new," as I hug her closer. Her hand, having nestled in forbidden territory, begins to glide between my legs.

"Shiori."

Her whisper is mine alone to hear, tickling my ears.

Her fingers brush against a part I'd rather keep hidden.

Some of my emotions, overflowing, taints her.

As she presses down softly, my colored voice spills out uncontrollably.

Her fingers move gently, and I start to melt.

Hazuki.

Involuntarily, my voice calls her, my body reacting.

Hazuki, Hazuki.

A name I hadn't intended to whisper pours out again and again.

Shiori.

As I calls her name again and again, something sticky and sludgy wraps around Sendai-san.

"Let me hear your voice more."

She whispers in my ear, and my nails dig into her back.

"No."

"Shiori."

The sugary voice prompts my teeth to clench.

"I want to be closer to you, Shiori."

Holding her tighter, my arms wrap around her securely.

"I'm here with you, Shiori."

Sendai-san embeds herself within me, reshaping who I am, making unacceptable things okay, unforgivable things allowable. I need her so much that nothing would begin without her.

"Shiori, I'm not going anywhere."

Her hand tenderly caresses me.

The reason I grasped melts away and dissolves into a sea.

Sendai-san becomes tainted, and I was drowning.

I trace her spine with my hands, clenching her hips. Her skin, smooth wherever I touch, invites me.

I long to touch her more, to be touched by her more.

"That's why, Shiori."

Her fingers move deliberately, caressing places only she knows.

Pressing firmly and tenderly, sliding, ever connected.

I embrace Sendai-san, so close I can't stand it.

Our bodies pressed snugly together, delighting in sensual intimacy.

"Stay by my side."

Sendai-san's hand presses against me.

The sea formed from the remnants of my rationality deepens, leaving me breathless. Swept away by overflowing emotions, I sink, grasping Sendai-san to avoid being alone.

"Hazuki," I utter, a raspy voice emerging as I sink further.

"Hazuki, stop," I plead.

It's painful and I bite her shoulder hard enough to leave a mark.

"What is it?"

"I don't know, but stop."

I can't think clearly.

In a room far from total darkness, everything starts to fade.

"Why?"

"Because... I'm confused."

"Let yourself be confused."

"No, stop."

The fingers I dirtied now return the favor.

Thick, swirling emotions pour into the sea, pulling me further into its depths.

"Hazuki, please stop," I plead.

It's painful, I'm overwhelmed, gasping for breath I can't catch.

"Do you really want me to stop?"

I don't want her to stop, yet I do.

I long to keep feeling her warmth.

My mind is jumbled, thoughts tangled into knots.

"It's not that I don't want to, but...."

The fingers pressed against me melt into me.

The body I embrace refuses to separate from me.

It feels so good that our distinctions blur, merging us into an inseparable entity. Sendai-san becomes me, and I become her, melted together and indistinguishable.

Without Sendai-san, the world seems dull and meaningless.

Yet, we can't remain one forever.

I'm scared.

"Please stop," I murmur.

Sendai-san's thigh presses against me, its smoothness and warmth apparent.

My heart races noisily, breaths shallow, yet I want her closer. But I'm frightened when I think about what will happen when we're apart.

I don't know what to do.

"Hazuki."

I gather the voice inside my body, calling the name meant only for me.

My thoughts refuse to untangle.

They coil in circles, sinking to the depths of my heart.

From this blurred world, light spills over, but I'm cast into a dark world I've never seen, halting my breath.

"Hey, I can't take anymore. Today will be gone, so stop." I implore, seeking solace as my nails dig into her back.

Her slow-moving fingers increase in speed.

My overflowing emotions make sounds, drenching Sendai-san.

"Shiori."

The voice tailored only for me feels good. Clinging to her, I search for the reason that evades me.

"H-Hazuki."

Floating gently, my body feels weightless, all tension fleeing.

Sendai-san still hugs me tightly.

It's hard to breathe, the heat is suffocating, and Sendai-san's body feels good.

Slowly, I let my eyes close.

Chapter 132

Miyagi Only For Me (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 382

Shiori.

I could call out her name so many more times, but doing so seems like it would make the usual Miyagi might return, so I hold back.

She was once like a stray cat, not getting close to anyone. But now, here she is, like a small kitten, quietly resting in my arms. And that is more than enough for me.

If possible, I would love for her to call me Hazuki again, like she did many times before. But her mouth, which had been endlessly repeating my name, no longer seems inclined to call it. It only moves to regulate her uneven breaths.

No matter how many times we engage in this act, it still makes my chest feel tight, and my heart races the same way as the first time we did it.

Her smooth skin.

Her heated body.

Her seductive voice.

Today, everything felt closer than ever before. I sensed Miyagi more vividly than ever, to the point where my overfilled heart seemed like it might break. I feared the screws of my reason might come loose and never tighten again.

I gently kiss Miyagi's forehead.

Her body shifts within my embrace, snuggling even closer, erasing any nonexistent gap between us.

"Hazuki."

The name I thought would no longer be called is uttered softly.

Miyagi draws closer, her lips finding mine.

My body temperature rises a degree.

I let out a slow breath, as a flame reignites my cooling form.

My heated body, much like Miyagi's, threatens to melt the depths of my heart.

"Shiori."

I softly call her cherished name.

Miyagi embraces me more tightly, allowing me to utter her name.

Our bodies adhere closely, an astonishingly pleasant sensation. I nearly wish to relinquish the regained screws of my reason.

"Shiori."

Upon calling her name again, Miyagi moves slightly.

Our tightly pressed bodies part a little, as her hand tenderly caresses my cheek in reassurance.

Although the room is dark, it feels bright.

Miyagi retains her form, clearly visible to my eyes.

Her lack of illumination does not stop me from seeing her.

Miyagi is adorable.

More precious than on my birthday.

Words fail to encompass my feelings.

I wish to cherish her beyond any construct of this world. Miyagi, more adorable than anyone, rightfully deserves it.

I reach toward her cheek but pause.

"Sorry."

"...What?"

"My hand..."

Without needing to look, I know my hand is slick, dampened by the warmth overflowing from Miyagi. I am unbothered by it, though she might be.

"It's fine."

Miyagi, seemingly aware of my thoughts, reassures me in a mellow voice.

Perhaps she is not yet fully back to being 'Miyagi.'

"Are you sure?"

"I'm going to take a bath anyway."

As I tried to look at the hand that still held vestiges of her name, I hear a voice that still didn't seem to have fully regained its rationality, as she calls out "Hazuki."

Miyagi's hand touches the clover pendant around my neck, lightly biting my collarbone. The slight sensation shatters the restraint I painstakingly reassembled, sending scattered screws rolling to the room's corners again.

I love you.

The words I want to say, but can't, nearly spill out from me.

However, I should continue to try and keep these feelings contained.

Even if fragments of my feelings escape and fall.

"Shiori."

As Miyagi nibbles at my neck, I stroke her waist.

Today, Miyagi has resisted by only saying "No."

I don't have the kind of wishful thinking that can convert every 'No' into a 'Yes,' and I lack confidence in myself. Even if I had confidence, I would not act against Miyagi's wishes.

And yet, when her arms circled around my back, they dispelled the 'No' she uttered, closing the gap between us.

Even now, we remain at this close distance, feeling each other's warmth.

Our feelings have not overlapped entirely, but surely, they are nearly there. I want to believe that.

"Hazuki."

Miyagi’s lips glide along my neck, attaching beneath my collarbone.

Without hesitation, she draws strongly enough to leave a mark.

"Because you're mine."

Miyagi states in a voice clearer than before.

Stay by my side.

Her words sounded like an answer to the words I had spoken earlier, and my heart skipped a beat.

I belong to Miyagi, and nothing would change that fact.

"...Shiori, one more time?"

When I place my hand on her chest, she peels it away with a brisk motion.

"No."

"But there is still plenty of time."

"We're not doing it, no matter how much time there is."

"I want to see more of the cute Miyagi."

"Absolutely not."

The familiar Miyagi's voice returns.

Even so, when I gently place my hand on her side, she pushes me away with a foot, and I pull her into a hug.

"It's hot, Sendai-san."

The name "Hazuki" vanishes from Miyagi.

Her voice, now safeguarded by reason, nudges at my shoulders.

"Are you done calling me Hazuki?"

"Finished."

"What about Shiori?"

"That too, finished."

Miyagi replies in a low voice.

"Shiori."

When I whisper near her ear, she kicks me again.

"I said it’s hot, and calling me Shiori is finished."

Miyagi becomes entirely 'Miyagi,' offering nothing to latch onto.

Miyagi, as she usually is, is precious and indispensable to me, yet I yearn to indulge in her unguarded state a bit longer.

"Then, I'll move a little, and switch back to calling you Miyagi. Can I turn on the light?"

"No, get me the towel blanket."

"What for?"

"Just get it."

Saying that, Miyagi presses against my shoulder.

I take the towel blanket from where it shyly sits in the corner of the bed and hand it to her.

With a roll and a tumble.

In a blink, Miyagi wraps herself securely, turning away from me.

"You're like a caterpillar."

When I poke at the bundled towel, a dissatisfied voice reaches me.

"It's because of you, Sendai-san."

"I'm to blame?"

"You say strange things and touch weird places."

"You've let me touch you before."

"That annoys me."

The towel bundle turns toward me, pushing against my stomach through the fabric.

“I wasn’t told I’d be stripped this much, and that there'd be this much touching.”

"But you undressed yourself, didn’t you?"

"You told me to take it off, Sendai-san."

"Still, it was your decision. And touching is okay, isn't it? That's what we're doing."

"It's not okay. Too much touching."

"I wanted to touch you more. Can I touch you now?"

I gently caress near her face over the towel blanket, clasping her arm softly.

"No way. Absolutely not."

Miyagi states unkindly, emerging from the towel to bite down on my hand.

A slight pain.

Yet, it feels pleasant.

"Even if not now, I want to touch you again. I want to be with Miyagi, tomorrow and the day after."

Drawing close to her ear and whispering softly, I plant a kiss on her cheek. Her response is a curt, “Pervert.”

“Well, if being a pervert is okay, then let me in the towel blanket with you.”

“I won’t, no way.”

With that, Miyagi retreats beneath the towel blanket once more, hiding away. Watching her wrapped up like a caterpillar, I call her “stingy” and hold the tightly wrapped towel bundle in a gentle embrace.

“Miyagi. I mentioned this before, but if something ever happens when I’m not around, don’t wait in front of my room—go inside. You can come in uninvited.”

The towel bundle makes no responsive twitch at my words.

It remains curled up and still.

“There’s nothing in my room that you seeing would bother me. Please remember what I just said.”

The towel bundle stirs slightly in my arms.

Still, her face stays hidden.

Shiori.

In my mind, I call out the name I’ve repeated countless times today, and I press a kiss onto the cocoon of a towel bundle.

Chapter 133

Unchanged Days with Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 383

Morning arrives, and then night falls. When night comes, morning follows once more. There are no questions about the predictability of this routine.

I don't question the presence of Sendai-san in this routine either, believing she should remain where I can see her. Even when being touched by Sendai-san in the darkness where we can only vaguely make out each other's forms, nothing changes. That's why today, just like any other day, I find myself having breakfast with her.

"Let's eat."

Our voices synchronize as we take bites of toast slathered in butter and jam.

Even though there was less jam, it's still delicious. Across from me, Sendai-san, who prepared today's breakfast, also seems to enjoy her toast.

The soft-boiled eggs and sausages plated before us are her handiwork too, so they must taste good, as always.

"Did you sleep well, Miyagi?"

Her gentle voice drifts over, and I respond with a "So-so."

I didn't sleep too deeply.

But considering what happened yesterday, it's only natural.

I ended up undressing in a room that wasn't completely dark, and afterward, without thinking, I called her Hazuki.

Consequently, I didn't know how to face Sendai-san during dinner yesterday. My gaze kept evading hers, and I couldn't really look at her.

Even after retreating to my room, I couldn't shake off the thoughts — did I overthink things, did Sendai-san find it odd — and the endless conjectures kept me from a restful sleep.

I bite into the egg white and take another bite of toast.

"Would it help you sleep better if I became your body pillow?"

Sendai-san smiles and suggests something ridiculous.

"No need."
"Why not?"
"There's no room."
"Then maybe I should buy a bigger bed."
"No need. I won't sleep with you. Did you sleep well, Sendai-san?"
"Not really, since Miyagi wouldn't sleep beside me."

Just like always, Sendai-san does nothing but indulge in silly remarks, as she sips orange juice from a black cat-themed mug.

"It's absurd to sleep together."
"But we could have just drifted off as we were."
"It wasn't time to sleep yet. We hadn't even eaten dinner yet."

To her, it may have seemed natural to drift off to sleep, but without dinner, it simply wasn't feasible.

There had been enough time since then to bathe and have a meal, making it customary to spend the night in our respective rooms, a fact that should not be contested.

"If Miyagi would have stayed with me, I wouldn't have needed dinner."
"That's nonsense."

Even though I appreciate the delicious dinner and breakfast she prepared, there's no need for indulgence towards someone like Sendai-san, who constantly spouts nonsense. I glare at her and reach for a sausage.

"It's true about not sleeping well and not needing dinner if you stayed. But, buying a bed isn't necessary; a tight squeeze is fine because it means being closer to Miyagi."
"Like I said, I'm not going to sleep with you."
"Then let's sleep together when it's winter. It'll be warm and pleasant."

Sendai-san says something that makes me want to sigh, all while beaming at me.

Watching Sendai-san like this, it's hard to believe she's the same person from yesterday.

If yesterday's version of her persisted, I'd be left in perpetual confusion, possibly leading me to say more unnecessary things. So it's preferable for her to remain predictably silly as usual, even if today's comments are particularly excessive.

"Sendai-san, just eat quietly."

I tap her foot with my toe to silence her.

But she's silent for only a moment before looking at me with a renewed, “Oh, by the way, are you alright, Miyagi?”

“Alright in what way?”

“About Sunday.”

Her words almost make me sigh, but I swallow it down.

A message from Mio-san sent last night flashes into my mind.

"Would this Sunday work for Hazuki and Shiori-chan's birthday party?"

The dreaded message was dropped into our group “Strange Birds” consisting of Sendai-san, Maika, Mio-san, and me, indicating that Sunday—this weekend—would be when celebrations for my birthday, along with Sendai-san's, were to be held.

“Even if I'm not alright, it’s a promise.”

I had been asked about open days in advance; saying I was busy

would just result in another message asking for alternative dates, so there's no escaping this promise. Though I'm reluctant, declining isn't an option.

Moreover, Mio-san is an important friend Sendai-san should cherish. While Sendai-san's closeness with Mio-san has its complications, refusing it isn't allowed.

Regardless of my irritation or frustration, Sendai-san should cultivate meaningful friendships.

"...Also, Maika is looking forward to it."

Maika will be attending the birthday party too.

When she discovered Sendai-san and I spent our birthdays alone together, she didn't pry. She was the same when she found out we were roommates.

Maika is always kind.

And because I don't want to trample on her excitement, I have to accept the reality of one birthday being celebrated twice.

"I see. Mio is really looking forward to it too."
"Is Mio-san always this high-energy at university?"
"Not always. There are times she feels down."
"Really?"

Imagining a hyper Mio-san is easy, but a dejected one doesn't come to mind.

"The other day, she was upset because a café part-timer quit after just a week."
"Why would Mio-san be affected by that?"
"Though she's usually carefree, she has a strong sense of responsibility. She kept reflecting, thinking, 'Was it my poor teaching that made them quit so soon?' "
"Now that you mention it, she taught me very patiently when I worked part-time."

Ever since our first encounter, I've found Mio-san challenging.

She was assertive and heedless, never restrained. Seemingly more

carefree than even Sendai-san, I couldn't fathom part-timing together.

Yet, I've met Mio-san repeatedly, eventually even working alongside her.

And I've realized, Mio-san is considerate and kind-hearted.

Her only flaw is a broken compass when it comes to measuring interpersonal distance.

"Mio-san is a good person."

Though certain traits of hers still irk me, I don't dislike her.

"...Would you want to work at the café again?"

Sendai-san mumbles and takes a sip of her juice.

“No, I wouldn't.”
“Even if it was just us two?”
“No. Are you planning to increase your part-time work during winter break, Sendai-san?”

I have no urge for part-time work, not even with Sendai-san. There’s nothing I desire enough to work for, preferring to spend winter break here at home.

“That’s the plan.”

Her predictably unexciting answer rolls forth, accompanied by “I’m not planning to go home, you’re staying too, right?” I affirm with a “Not going home.”

"How about we go for a New Year’s shrine visit next year?"

"You asked last year too, but still no, it’s too cold."

Though a New Year's shrine visit is not exactly a festival, remembering the recent festival brings back the memory of being made to wear a yukata. Just like back then, Sendai-san might suggest something ridiculous like, "It's New Year's, let's wear kimonos together!" so I can't casually say "I'll go."

I take a sip of orange juice and add, "I'll stay at home."

Unchanged Days with Sendai-san (II)

Part 384

"…Sendai-san, what is this?"

Even without asking, I understand. But it's something I don't want to understand.

The things that are laid out on the floor of Sendai-san's room cause the words in my head to spill into the outside world.

"Felt letters spelling out 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY' and star-shaped balloons. It's a common decoration set for room decorations."

She's not wrong.

Before my eyes are the letters for celebrating a birthday and star-shaped balloons without any air in them. Considering what today is, it's not strange for such things to be on the floor.

—The promised Sunday.

This afternoon, Maika and Mio-san are coming to this house to celebrate my and Sendai-san's birthday.

Even though nothing is incorrect, it doesn't mean I can understand it. My mind recognizes this situation as something unacceptable and refuses to comprehend it.

"Are you decorating with this?"

I shift my gaze from the items on the floor and look intently at Sendai-san.

She asked me to help her, so I came to this room. So, considering there's a decoration set, without even asking, I know it must be for decorating, yet I can't help but ask.

"With just the two of us, Miyagi. It'll be quick, so help me out."

"...I didn't hear about decorating like this."

I've accepted the day itself, but the room should stay as it always is. I struggle with this party-like atmosphere. I can't bring myself to enjoy actions that transform a birthday to stand out from other days.

After all, it's the second time I'm celebrating a birthday.

Even with Maika and Mio-san coming, there's no need to go out of the way to decorate the room.

"Did you buy this, Sendai-san?"

It seems unlikely, but I ask anyway.

"Mio bought it. At the university, she asked whether I preferred her bringing it and decorating it herself, or if I'd do it, and when I said I'd do it myself, she handed it over."

"What about the option of not decorating?"

Though Sendai-san isn't at fault, my tone unwittingly comes off as accusatory.

"I told Mio we didn't need anything, but she had already bought it and insisted on giving it to me."

Imagining the interaction between Sendai-san and Mio-san, I feel an urge to hold my head in my hands.

I'm sure Mio-san, with one hundred percent good intentions, wanted to make our birthday a joyful one.

The choice of a decoration set reflects the brightness of Mio-san's personality, which illuminates even the corners of a room, dazzling only me.

Decorating a room for a birthday must be common for most people, and if someone was asked if they'd like decorations, most people likely wouldn't refuse. Therefore, it makes sense that Mio-san lightly handed Sendai-san the buoyant letters and restless balloons.

"…Why didn't you say anything when you were given them?"

Even understanding the situation, complaints slip from my mouth.

"Because I thought you'd make this face, Miyagi."

For once, Sendai-san frowns with a troubled expression and touches my cheek.

I don't know what kind of face she's referring to.

But apparently, it's not a good one, as I hear a gentle "I'm sorry."

"Let's skip decorating then. When Mio comes, I'll convince her."

Sendai-san's hand warmly holds my cheek.

"…Where will we decorate?"

Though my voice comes out small, I convey the words I should say, and the hand touching my cheek moves away, her fingers gently combing through my hair.

"You don't have to push yourself."

"It's fine. Let's decorate. I get that Mio-san means no harm."

Though I'm not enthusiastic about it, having accepted a second birthday, I should accept the accompanying "decorations" as well. It's unbecoming to sulk and disregard Mio-san's kindness by refusing to decorate.

"Where should we decorate?"

I ask, holding the buoyant letters from the floor, noticing they are all connected by strings. The phrase "Happy Birthday" dances on the floor, and with a gentle tug, it slides into my hands.

"On the wall by the bed."

Sendai-san points toward the middle of the wall around there.

"Got it."

Standing on the bed with the birthday letters in hand, Sendai-san

joins me, holding the final letter "Y" of the "Happy Birthday" phrase.

Together, we attach the buoyant letters to the wall, step down from the bed, and check their positioning. It seems slightly crooked, so after adjusting it, we blow up the balloons.

"Where do they go?"

When I ask, she replies, "For now, let's set them on the bed," so I toss the inflated star-shaped balloons onto the bed with a light lob.

"It suddenly feels like a party."

Observing the letters on the wall and the scattered balloons, Sendai-san comments.

"Feels very much like Mio-san."

"Indeed. It feels like Mio is here even before she arrives."

We agree, and as Sendai-san chuckles, she sits on the bed. Surrounded by the sparkling star-shaped balloons, I instinctively grab her arm.

"Miyagi?"

She softly calls out, and I squeeze the arm I'm holding.

Giving a gentle tug, I pull her towards me, making Sendai-san stand up.

"What is it?"

When she asks, I simply reply, "It's nothing."

Pulling with a bit more force, I touch her necklace.

"…Hazuki."

The name I didn't mean to say spills out.

"What?"

"We'll keep these decorations until Mio-san leaves, right?"

The decorations unfamiliar to this room separate this birthday from all other days, and suddenly, they transform Sendai-san's room into something unknown to me.

"I'm planning to have her take them back."

Sendai-san states firmly.

"Really?"

"Really."

Since moving to this home, we've never been surrounded by things purchased by others. We lived amidst our own belongings, seldom letting anything else disrupt that. It was natural for our home to be composed of things chosen by us.

But today is different.

Things not chosen by us adorn the wall, and things not chosen by us are scattered on the bed.

It's unsettling.

Though this room is Sendai-san's, it's also my place, a once comfortable space, now a source of unease.

"Hazuki."

This time, I call her deliberately.

With my lips touching her neck, I bite down gently.

I press down with just enough force to not leave any marks and she whispers.

"A mark?"

I press down on the four-leaf clover.

"It's right here."

"Wouldn't it be more reassuring if there were more?"

The alluring voice reaches my ears, prompting me to trace my fingers along her neck.

Marks that signify she's mine alone—there can never be too many.

Right now, this room is too saturated with Mio-san's presence.

This sensation will persist for a while.

Though Sendai-san also has her blue earrings and necklace, perhaps that's not enough.

"Miyagi."

"...That's not it."

That's not the word I want to hear right now.

Gently biting Sendai-san's lip, I aim to draw out the word I long for.

"Shiori."

Her soft voice echoes in my ears, and I grasp her hand.

Rolling up her sleeve, my fingers glide along her veins.

I press my lips against her wrist and suck hard.

"Shiori."

Sendai-san's voice rains down from above my head.

I feel a strong desire to remove her clothes and leave marks all over her body.

But not now.

This room is filled with things that are not ours.

Others might see what should be seen only by me.

Slowly, I pull my lips away from her wrist.

After confirming the faint mark left behind, I tell Sendai-san, "Stay in your usual clothes today."

Unchanged Days with Sendai-san (III)

Part 385

Five minutes before the promised time.

Neither I nor Sendai-san went to pick them up, but Maika and Mio-san still arrived, and the usually quiet space with just the two of us suddenly became lively.

"Oh, it's starting to feel like a birthday!"

Mio-san's voice resounded in Sendai-san's room as Maika looked at the wall.

"Oh, what’s this? Did Shiori and Sendai-san decorate?"

When Maika spotted the felt letters and star-shaped balloons celebrating the birthday, which Sendai-san and I had put up in the morning, I simply replied, "Yes," and Sendai-san added, "By Mio's orders."

"Mio-san’s?"

Maika shifted her gaze from the wall's letters to Mio-san.

"Yep, since it's a party, I wanted to make the room look festive, so I bought them and had Hazuki put them up. Initially, I was going to give them one printed with 'Hazuki & Shiori', but I figured Shiori-chan might not like it, so I held back."

I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude towards Mio-san for her restraint, and when Maika chimed in with, "Maybe next year I'll make one and give it to Shiori," I immediately rejected the notion.

"I'm definitely not decorating with that."
"Aw, Shiori, you’re so boring."
"I'm not boring. Just normal."
"Then here's a present for the normally enthusiastic Shiori-chan."

Even more excited than when she appeared on the intercom screen,

Mio-san handed me a box with a cheerful expression. I was about to ask, "Is this a cake?" but before I could say anything, Mio-san announced it herself.

"You can probably tell by the box, but it's birthday cake. I brought various kinds."
"Thank you."
"You're welcome. And Hazuki, this is for you. Open it."

With a beaming smile, Mio-san handed a bag to Sendai-san, urging her like a child with a "here, here."

"Thank you."

Sendai-san took the bag and peered inside. Almost immediately she looked up, drawing her eyebrows in exaggerated confusion at Mio-san.

"Feels like Christmas all of a sudden."

The out-of-place words unexpectedly reached my ears, prompting an involuntary "Christmas?" from my lips. Beside me, Maika echoed with "Christmas?" as well.

"It's a Christmas staple, but you can drink it anytime," Mio-san's bright voice resonated in the room. Curious about the bag's contents, I asked Sendai-san.

"What’s inside?"
"Chanmerry."

The name of the carbonated drink, which I remembered from my childhood but hadn't touched since my mother left, reached my ears. I leaned over to peek into the bag Sendai-san held.

Inside were two bottles of Chanmerry, encased in the gold packaging often associated with Christmas.

"Do they sell Chanmerry outside of Christmas?" Maika asked, seemingly surprised.

"They sell it normally. I wanted to bring champagne, but since we said no alcohol today, I brought this for the festive vibe."
"I don't really like carbonated drinks."

Sendai-san stated it as if it were nothing, which prompted an oblivious, surprised response from Mio-san.

"Huh? That's the first I've heard of it."
"Me too," Maika echoed, and Sendai-san chuckled lightly.

"I just mentioned it now."

Apparently, I was the only one who knew she disliked carbonation, and the satisfaction of being privy to this fact blossomed within me, but knowing it's now common knowledge reduces its importance, prompting me to clench my hand tightly.

"Hazuki, you should say these things sooner. Want me to get something else?"
"It's fine. There's something in the fridge that isn't carbonated."

I gazed at Sendai-san.

She had dressed up nicely for my birthday, but today she was in a normal blouse and skirt that she would wear to university.

This is the usual Sendai-san I wanted.

Her presence in this birthday-themed, unusually decorated room soothed my emotions, as I've been thrown into an out-of-the-ordinary circumstance.

Though she looks beautiful in any attire, having her not dressed exceptionally today saves me from casting unpleasant thoughts toward Maika or Mio-san.

"More importantly, let's sit down. I'll bring the pizza and other food that just arrived. Oh, Miyagi, give me the cake; I'll put it in the fridge."

Upon saying this, Sendai-san took the cake box from me and disappeared into the shared space, leaving us to gather around the table as directed.

"Oh, I expected they might not even be used, but I'm glad they were," Mio-san chimed in delightfully from a diagonal position, and across from her, Maika said, "These things are nice," enjoying the

birthday decorations as they started discussing them.

I looked straight ahead at the empty space meant for Sendai-san.

She rarely sits opposite of me in this room; her usual seat is beside me.

Though her seat placement doesn't change who she is, it remains unsettling.

"When Maika's birthday comes, let's all drink together," Mio-san suggested playfully.
"Awesome! You all should come to my place next time," Maika responded enthusiastically.

I felt like I couldn't just watch the empty space forever, so I shifted my gaze toward Maika, who quipped, "I'll prepare drinks for Shiori too, so be sure to come," causing me to reflexively respond, "Sure."

Then, instantly regretting my automatic reply, I realized I had unintentionally agreed to participate in a gathering I didn't necessarily want. Celebrating Maika's birthday is fine, but the alcohol is unnecessary.

However, unable to voice this sentiment in the given atmosphere, I merely gave vague nods to Maika and Mio-san's conversation until Sendai-san's voice called from beyond the door.

"Miyagi, can you open it?"

Upon being summoned, I stood up. As I opened the door, Sendai-san stood there holding pizzas and side dishes, and I received the salad and chicken from her.

We organized the late lunch on the table together and were about to fetch the drinks when Maika enthusiastically offered, "Let me help," to which I replied, "It's fine, just relax."

Heading to the shared space with Sendai-san, I retrieved orange juice from the fridge. As I poured the orange liquid into the glasses Sendai-san had prepared, a soft voice reached my ears.

"Miyagi, is everything okay?"

No, not really. Concealing the words I wanted to say, I filled the third glass with orange juice, before looking at Sendai-san.

I should have left more marks.

I reached for Sendai-san's bare neck, pressing my fingertips strongly enough to feel the blood flowing before letting go.

My fingers slowly touched her blue earring.

"When Maika's birthday comes, and everyone drinks, promise me you won't drink, Sendai-san."

I know I'm being selfish. But the drunk Sendai-san is someone I want to keep for myself alone.

A drunken Sendai-san isn't something to be revealed to others, nor should anyone but me witness the inebriated version of her.

"Promise. But is it already decided that we'll gather for Utsunomiya's birthday too?"
"I don't know, but it's hard to say no when Maika wants us to gather for her birthday."

Maika is my best friend. When your best friend wishes for you to come over on their birthday, it's something you can't refuse.

"Miyagi's best friend, after all," Sendai-san said in a flat tone and lifted the corners of her lips, adding, "We have to celebrate."

"Pour the orange juice, Miyagi. I'll take it over."

Her bright voice prompted me to release my hand from the blue earring.

I poured the orange liquid into the last glass and put the orange juice back into the fridge. Turning around, I saw Sendai-san placing the glasses on a tray, and as I watched her hands intently, she called my name.

"Miyagi."

No further words followed.
Sendai-san's gaze was fixed on the glasses on the table.

Suddenly, the air in the shared space felt thinner, almost suffocating. The orange hue that filled the glasses, reminiscent of a midsummer sun, appeared hazy. I called to her.

"Sendai-san..."

"Call me Hazuki," came her small voice, and I grasped her wrist where I had left a mark.

Anyone who is Sendai-san's friend calls her by her first name. Just earlier, Mio-san had called her Hazuki. Even back in high school, she was often called Hazuki.

So, it's not a name that only I use. However, because her name is something that belongs to me alone, I say her name so that only she can hear.

"Hazuki."

A four-leaf clover sparkles at Sendai-san's chest.

The world isn't just ours; it's full of people other than us, but the Sendai-san adorned with the necklace and earrings I chose is mine alone.

"Shall we take the orange juice over?" Sendai-san said in her usual voice.
I opened the door to her room.
Carrying the tray, she returned to the birthday-adorned space.

After taking a deep breath, I stepped into the lively room where cheerful decorations and two smiling faces awaited.

Chapter 134

My Room and Miyagi (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 386

My birthday has long since passed, and so has Miyagi's.

Since birthdays occur only once a year, once ours are over, we won't have another until the next year. However, this year is different.

"Happy Birthday, Hazuki, Shiori-chan! Happy Birthday, both of you!"
"Shiori, Sendai-san, Happy Birthday!"

The voices of Mio and Utsunomiya harmonize, echoing in my room as they sit politely at the table set with pizza and side dishes.

A birthday party with our friends.

It's not an unusual situation, but it's unfolding in my room. Essentially, this past year's birthdays have been brought back by Mio and Utsunomiya, and Miyagi and I are being celebrated for turning twenty.

Although it's enjoyable, I'm not accustomed to having anyone other than Miyagi in this room under the pretext of "celebrating a birthday."

"Thank you," Miyagi says in a subdued voice. I also thank our two friends.

One birthday is enough.

Miyagi had said that, and I also think we don't need multiple celebrations. Still, I can't disregard Mio and Utsunomiya's feelings, and it would hurt my heart to ignore them.

"Congratulations on turning twenty!"

Mio exclaims in a moderately loud voice, and she and Utsunomiya pop party crackers from somewhere.

"Oh, these are just for the sound. They don't make a mess."

Mio boasts, setting off the cracker again.

Indeed, the crackers only made noise—no tape comes shooting out. Although it feels a bit lacking, I'm relieved that nothing landed on the pizza.

"That's not like you, Mio. Don't you usually like flashy things?"

I remark, observing Mio being uncharacteristically reserved.

"I'm an adult now at twenty, so I make considerations."

"You don't seem like Mio-san," Miyagi mutters, and Mio beams with delight.

"It's the side of me Shiori-chan doesn't know."

"... Mio-san was just like Mio-san after all."
"Guess that means Mio-san has grown up."

As Mio compliments herself and nods in agreement, Utsunomiya delivers a sharp comment.

"Adults don't usually call themselves 'adults,' do they?"
"But I'm sure some do, right, Hazuki?"
"Well then, shall we eat?"

When I flash an exaggerated smile at Miyagi and Utsunomiya, Mio protests loudly and remembers to add,

"But wait. Before we eat, it's gift time!"
"Gift time?"

Miyagi and I say in confusion.

"Maika-chan, take it away."

As Mio calls out, Utsunomiya retrieves a bag from a large backpack

she brought.

"This is a gift from Mio-san and me for both of you."
"But I already received a birthday gift from Maika."

Miyagi replies to Utsunomiya, and I echo, "I got one from Mio too."
In sync, they both reply, "It's okay, even if we give more," so in unison, Miyagi and I respond with "Thank you."

I'm curious.

Utsunomiya mentioned it's a gift for both of us, but there's only one bag. This suggests the contents must be something we can use together.

"Miyagi, you take it."

Imagining something like dishes or ornaments inside the bag, I say this, and Miyagi repeats, "Thanks," as she accepts the bag from Utsunomiya.

"Open it up right now, Shiori-chan."

Mio's excited tone reaches me.

"Alright, then, I'll open it."

Without hesitation, Miyagi opens the bag and takes out a thin, but not insignificant, box. She opens the box and extracts a folded cloth.

"…An apron?"

At Miyagi's questioning look, Mio responds.

"Yep, an apron. Since you both mentioned cooking."

As Mio said, Miyagi holds an apron with a chest covering.

The color is beige.
There are no prints or lace embellishments.
It's a simple apron that fits well in this house.

There are two of them.
Both are in Miyagi's hands.

"Does this mean they match?"

Miyagi inquires, not sounding particularly amused, but not displeased either.

"So there wouldn't be any arguments, we got the same ones."

Utsunomiya says, laughing, "Doesn't it feel like a newlywed couple?" and Miyagi quickly retorts, "We're not newlyweds or a couple."

"Here, this one's for you, Sendai-san,"

From across the table, an identical apron makes its way toward me.

The same one as Miyagi's.

It's delightful, no matter what it is.
If it's something matching that Miyagi chose, I'd be thrilled enough to never let anyone else touch it, and if it’s something I chose, I'd be delighted to use it daily.

But neither Miyagi nor I chose this apron.
Someone else chose it for us.

"We didn't have any aprons, so it's perfect. I'll take good care of it. Thank you."

I put on a smile and look at Mio and Utsunomiya.
I don't intend to criticize a present from our friends, but it's complicated.
I can't wholeheartedly rejoice.

To put it in a word, I'm just narrow-minded.

Rather than the joy of matching items, the feeling of something not chosen by us intruding into our daily lives is more uncomfortable.

I wish it had been something we wouldn't use regularly. Something consumable or used only occasionally.
That would have been better.

"Who picked the aprons?"

I ask without dropping my smile.

"Mio chose the style, I picked the color."
"It was a joint effort."

Utsunomiya says with a giggle.

Friends are important.

Miyagi also said that.
So, we should cherish what we receive from our friends.
I fold the apron and hand it to Miyagi.

This is not something that will disrupt our lives.

I look at Miyagi.
With a rare smile not often shown in front of me, she returns the aprons to the box and engages Utsunomiya in cheerful conversation.

"So you two went to look at aprons together?"
"Yes, we did. We're pretty close, right?"
"Surprisingly close, indeed."

At times like this, I feel that Miyagi should show some displeasure.

Even if it's from friends, I don't want things that intrude on our lives to be accepted so easily.

I think that, but I know better.
Miyagi is kind to Utsunomiya and treasures her.
She wouldn’t let a gift from someone she cherishes put her in a foul mood.

"Hazuki, there's one more gift. Here you go."

As she says this, Mio hands me a small box.

"Eh, why are there so many gifts?"
"This one isn't from me, it's from Noto-senpai. She said to use it with Shiori-chan."
"…Noto-senpai?"
"She asked me to bring it to you yesterday. Open it, I don't know what's inside either."

Caught up in the moment, I look at the box I received.

—I want to touch something from Miyagi.

The necklace or the mark on my wrist would suffice.
But I can't touch them now.

"I wonder what it is. I'll open it."

With an attempt at a bright voice, I open the box and find a movie gift card inside. It's a perfect gift for something to do with Miyagi, yet the words "thank you" don't come naturally.

"What was inside, Sendai-san?"

I hear Miyagi's voice and automatically respond, "A movie gift card."

"Nice!" Utsunomiya says enviously.

"Mio-san, make sure to thank Noto-san for me," Miyagi says.

"Okay," Mio replies lightly.

Their exchange is light-hearted, and I feel the need to express appropriate words for the occasion. I put the gift card back into the box and, after confirming that Miyagi's attention is elsewhere, I gently touch the mark Miyagi left behind.

"I'll thank her myself the next time I see her, but Mio, please pass my thanks to Noto-senpai too."

"Leave it to me," Mio replies confidently.

Even though I owe a debt of gratitude to Noto-senpai for introducing me to a tutoring job, her meddling with Miyagi and me is problematic. It feels like we're being pressured to go to the movies, and I can't help but feel displeased. This may not be her intention, but I simply can't accept it willingly.

I caress the mark Miyagi left again, and force a smile.

"The pizza's going to get cold if we leave it any longer; shall we eat?"

I suggest to the three of them, and they promptly agree.
We don't forget to say "Let's eat" and sink our teeth into the pizza.

While it's not quite the same as when it's just Miyagi and me, it's still delicious.

For now, I should forget about the presents and just enjoy today.

The felt letters pinned on the wall.
The star-shaped balloons on the bed.
The lively presence of Mio and Utsunomiya.

Today, in a room that’s different from usual, it's filled with more birthday essence than on an actual birthday.

"Hey, what if we bake our own pizza for Maika-chan's birthday next time?" Mio suggests, as if struck by a brilliant idea.

"Mio, isn’t that a bit too much of a hassle?"
"Well, we don't have a pizza oven anyway."
"That's way too professional," I chuckle.

I entertain Mio's pointless conversation while biting into the cooling pizza.

My Room and Miyagi (II)

Part 387

My room isn't that large, so with four people inside, it's naturally quite lively. Even as we eat our pizza, someone is constantly talking, adding to the cheerful atmosphere.

You might say it has a birthday-like vibe.

Back when I was in high school, I was accustomed to environments like this and could easily adapt to the atmosphere. I wished to do the same today and just thought I should enjoy the day, but I find it hard not to be distracted by Miyagi sitting right across from me.

Currently, she's chatting pleasantly with Mio and Utsunomiya.

It makes sense for her to converse with her best friend, Utsunomiya, but seeing her chat so amicably with Mio would have been unthinkable not too long ago. Observing this changed Miyagi stirs an unease within me.

I know how she became friends with Mio. She worked part-time at the café where Mio works in order to buy the necklace that now sparkles on my chest.

Given the reason, I can't complain.

Besides, Mio isn't a bad person. She falls into the category of a good person.
I can't exactly tell Miyagi not to get close to her.

I take a bit of the pizza.

Miyagi wasn't thrilled about me working part-time either.
She even asked me to quit once.

I briefly think about wanting Miyagi to return to the version of herself from before she started working part-time, and I take a sip of my orange juice to dismiss the thought.

I should view Miyagi's part-time work as a good thing, as it made it easier for me to work too. It means that it's also easier to achieve my dream of living with Miyagi instead of returning home after graduation, so there's no need to be disheartened.

After finishing the pizza on my plate, I move on to the chicken.

"Hazuki, shouldn't we open the Chanmerry and eat the cake soon?"

At Mio's suggestion, I glance at the table to find that most of the pizza and side dishes have already disappeared into our stomachs.

I respond, "Yeah, I'll go get it," and join Miyagi to bring plates with the Chanmerry and cake. When I try to hand the Chanmerry to Mio, she pushes it back to me, saying, "Hazuki, you should open it."

"Mio, the person who brought it should open it."
"Is it okay if I open it? Don't blame me for what happens."
"What do you mean by 'what happens?'"
"I'm not confident I can open it without spilling it. But since Hazuki said I should open it, I'll give it a try."

Cheerfully, Mio says so and snatches the Chanmerry from my hand, briskly opening the golden package.

"Hey, Mio, wait. I'll open it."
"Don't worry, don't worry. I'm just going to pull the cork out, so nothing as alarming as what Hazuki worries about will happen."

Even though she just admitted she wasn't confident, Mio assures me as she attempts to pull the cork out without even reading the instructions.

"Huh, it won't open."

She tilts her head, lifting the bottle to inspect it, causing the liquid inside to swirl.

I have a bad feeling about this.
No, I only have a bad feeling about this.

"Mio-san, isn't the cap on the Chanmerry supposed to be twisted off?"

Utsunomiya's voice reaches my ears, and when I glance at her, she too must be feeling uneasy since she's keeping her distance from the table.

"Oh, you twist it, right?"

Saying that, Mio twists the cork aggressively, producing a light "pop" in the room. Naturally, the contents burst out, and Mio's dismayed cry echoes.

"Ah, Hazuki. This is bad. Give me something!"

I grab a tissue from the platypus plushie's back and wipe the Chanmerry-soaked table and floor. No matter how you look at it, it's obviously faster if I do it myself rather than handing the tissues to Mio.

"Hazuki, sorry. Let me help."

As she says so, Mio tries to get up and plants her hand on the wet floor.

"Whoa, it's cold!"

Mio's cry echoes, prompting Miyagi to instruct, "Mio-san, don't move," before exiting the room to fetch a wet towel.

"Sorry, Shiori-chan."
"It's all right, but isn't Mio-san quite different from when she's at work?"

Miyagi points out, and with a straight face, Mio responds, "Today's me isn't in work mode."

Indeed, when she isn't working, Mio tends to be rather careless and laid-back.
It's no wonder she spilled the Chanmerry.

"Mio, if you're not in work mode, just stay quiet."
"Uh, sorry."

A pitiful voice echoes, and Miyagi bursts into giggles.

"Eh, Shiori-chan, what's so funny?"

"Mio-san, you're like a scolded child."
"Eh, is that how I seem?"
"Yeah."

The joy in Miyagi's laughter is more evident than at any other point today, and it captures my attention fully.

"Maika-chan, do I seem problematic today?"
"Not really problematic, just amusing."

Utsunomiya chuckles and comments, "You've spilled about half the Chanmerry," prompting Miyagi to laugh along.

This situation is indeed amusing.
If it were only Mio and Utsunomiya here, I'd be laughing too.

But right now, my lips won't curl into a smile.

The reason is simple.
Miyagi is giggling softly.
--While looking at Mio.

Today's Miyagi is "the fun-loving Miyagi who's with friends," but she hadn't been laughing out loud. Yet, here she is now, giggling.

This Miyagi is cute.

It's a face I don't get to see often, making me want to keep watching forever and see it again and again. However, I didn't cause this smile, and this isn't the aquarium where I could make Miyagi so happy.

Mio had effortlessly done something I rarely get to do.

I turn my gaze away from Miyagi and discard the wet tissue into the trash.

Yet immediately, Miyagi returns to my vision.
But my expression is frozen.

Still, I can't keep staring at Miyagi's laughter indefinitely, and I can't remain unsmiling in this situation either.

"Mio, go wash your hands."

"Will do."

With that, Mio leaves the room, and the three of us clean up the spilled Chanmerry. Soon after, Mio returns and tries to open the remaining bottle, prompting my unamused voice to stop her as I take it from her hands.

"Mio, you're banned from opening the Chanmerry. As for the last bottle... Should Miyagi or Utsunomiya open it?"

While pouring the remaining half of the original Chanmerry into glasses, I ask the other two.

"It's too much hassle, so I'm fine."

Miyagi's typical response is followed by Utsunomiya's eager voice, "I'd like to open it. I'll make sure not to spill it, is that okay?"

"Of course."

I hand the last bottle to Utsunomiya, explaining the opening instructions from the package.

"I think the cap needs to be twisted off. Also, don’t shake the bottle."
"Got it. Are you sure you're okay with it, Shiori?"

At Utsunomiya’s prompting, I glance back at Miyagi to find her usual, unsmiling demeanor.

"I'm okay. Leave it to Maika."

The expression Mio caused to surface has vanished from Miyagi, leaving me relieved and slightly disappointed.

Whenever I'm in this home with people other than Miyagi and me, my emotions become tangled, sparking unexpected feelings. My unchecked emotions threaten to twist my expression into one unfitting for the situation.

"Alright, I'll open it now."

Saying so, Utsunomiya twists the cap of the Chanmerry.

Pop.

The contents don't spill, and a pleasant sound echoes. I accept the bottle from Utsunomiya and pour the Chanmerry into glasses. When the four of us toast, Miyagi speaks up.

"Let me drink yours, Sendai-san."
"It's fine, it's not like I can't drink carbonated drinks."
"Don't force yourself; you can just have some orange juice."

Miyagi stretches out her hand calmly, so I pass her my glass without resistance.

"Hazuki, if you're not good with carbonated drinks, you also can't drink beer, right?" Mio remarks while eating her shortcake, adding, "And champagne's out of the question too."

"If you open a bottle of champagne, I'm sure you'll soak everything around you again," I tease, trying to untangle my mixed emotions as I turn my gaze to Mio.

"Erase that memory, please."
"You spilled quite a bit of the Chanmerry earlier, didn't you?" Utsunomiya chuckles, while Mio, having taken a big gulp of Chanmerry, dramatically pretends to lament.

"Sigh. I guess the three of you hate me now"
"Well, you did turn this place into a sea of Chanmerry."

I jest exaggeratedly, only to get a swift, "It wasn't a sea," in return.

"True, not quite a sea, but you did spill half of it, Mio-san," Utsunomiya comments with a cheerful grin, as Mio feigns wiping away tears.

"You're just as usual, Hazuki, but even Maika-chan said something like that... Shiori-chan, you wouldn't say something like that, right?"

"In this situation, I kind of have no choice but to say I wouldn't," Miyagi sighs dramatically.

"Phew, I'm glad. Shiori-chan still loves me, then."
"I never said I loved you." Miyagi states the words I was about to let slip, and I feel a sense of relief.

It's not good.
Being like this is really not good.

Mio is my friend, but right now, she’s also Miyagi's friend.
And Miyagi is kind to her friends.

She uses words she wouldn't use with me and shows expressions I seldom see. It’s not amusing, but it's something I should accept.

"I like you, Mio-san," Utsunomiya says cheerfully, to which Mio responds with, "Maika-chan, you're kind. Hazuki, you're so cold," turning a resentful look my way. Fixing my gaze on Mio instead of Miyagi, I speak up.

"Don't worry, Mio, I don't hate you."

I know I should say I like her in these situations, but in front of Miyagi, I don't want to say "I like you" to anyone else.

I grip my wrist, where traces of her linger.
I feel Miyagi's gaze.
I hold it tightly, hard enough to leave a mark, then gradually let go.

"Thanks to Maika-chan, not Hazuki, my self-esteem just got a big boost!"

Mio says brightly, adding, "The next party will be for Maika-chan’s birthday."

I look at Miyagi.
Our eyes meet.
But in an instant, her gaze shifts to my chest.

Miyagi's gaze rests on the four-leaf clover necklace that makes me who I am.

I thought that if I had a mark that everyone could see, that showed I was Miyagi's alone, I'd be able to navigate these kinds of situations with ease. Yet, it seems that's not the case. Today, I can't help but wish that, no matter what expression Miyagi wears—no matter who made her wear it—there would still be a mark of mine on her that shows she belongs to me.

I take a bite of the shortcake adorned with white cream and a

strawberry on top.

"This cake is delicious," I say, and I hear Miyagi respond, "It is."

My Room and Miyagi (III)

Part 388

The corners of my mouth won't lift.
My expression remains the same.
Today, I'm unable to muster a smile.

That's what I thought, but my face, accustomed to the disconnect between my inner feelings and outward appearance, was able to create an expression that didn't quite match my feelings, with a slight upward curve of my lips, and it seemed I could manage a somewhat decent smile. Neither Mio nor Utsunomiya asked me, "What's wrong?" and they both left with smiles on their faces.

In short, the "Hazuki & Shiori Birthday Party" proposed by Mio ended without a hitch. This meant I was returning to my everyday life with Miyagi, which brought me a sense of relief.

"This is definitely more relaxing."

Miyagi quietly voiced her agreement, gazing at the bare wall.

The festive letters and balloons that had adorned my room for the birthday theme were taken home by Mio. Now, my room is back to its usual state, with only the aprons gifted by Mio and Utsunomiya, and a movie gift card from Noto-senpai remaining as traces of the celebration.

"Miyagi."

I embrace Miyagi in what is no longer a birthday-themed room. As I tighten my arms around her back, I feel her warmth flow into me.

"I never said it was okay to do this."

Accompanied by a quiet murmur, Miyagi presses against my stomach.

"How about a kiss?"
"No."

She rudely refuses my touch and presses against my stomach further.

It's been such a long time since I last felt her warmth while we were preparing drinks in the shared space, and no matter how much I touch her now, it’s not enough.

I should respect Miyagi's wishes and accept her words, but I can't bring myself to loosen my arms. Unable to stop my lips from touching her, I gently kiss her cheek.

"I said no."

Her voice is indifferent, yet it doesn't feel like rejection. I steal a short kiss from Miyagi’s lips.

She says nothing.
But instead, she steps on my foot tightly.

"Don't you want me to kiss you?"
"Let go."
"Why?"

Miyagi, still in my embrace, remains silent.

Instead, she lightly bites at my neck, as if to convey her response. When I hug her more tightly and say, "It hurts," the pain fades, and I hear a soft voice.

"...Sendai-san, you looked like you were having fun."

From Miyagi's words, it becomes clear that my expression was cheerful, regardless of my intentions.

"You looked like you were having fun, too, Miyagi."

She was genuinely happy about receiving the apron, and she laughed while looking at Mio.

Today, Miyagi showed me a side of her that I don't usually see.

There are many sides of Miyagi that only I know, and I believe they will remain solely for me. However, I also want to own the Miyagi

that interacts with others - “The Miyagi I rarely see, yet others often can.”

"Maika and Mio-san came over; I couldn't exactly look bored, you know?"
"Same goes for me."
"...I get that, but it's annoying. You really did have fun, didn't you, Sendai-san?"

I’m not heartless enough to say “not at all” in such situations.

The cake, bought from a place that was popular on social media, was very delicious, and Mio kept the atmosphere lively.

Utsunomiya was also cheerful, doing her best to make today a memorable day. Those efforts definitely created a feeling of joy within me.

But more than anything, my thoughts were always drifting towards Miyagi.

"And you, Miyagi? How was it really for you?"
"...If you thought it was fun, Sendai-san, then there’s no way I couldn’t have enjoyed it too."

Miyagi spoke in a low voice and kicked at my leg.

"Hey, Miyagi. Is it okay if I kiss you?"
"Why does it always come to that? I said no—"

Interrupting Miyagi's disgruntled words, I steal them away with a kiss.

I think she’s fussing too much.
She should just quietly look at me.

I press our lips together firmly and slip my tongue inside her mouth. However, before anything else can happen, Miyagi pushes against my shoulder.

"Sendai-san!"

Miyagi’s voice vibrates in my eardrums.

"Miyagi. Why do you hate kissing so much?"

For us, kissing is as ordinary as it gets—part of our everyday life. While we may not do it in front of others, there's no reason to refuse a kiss in this room.

"Does it matter why?"

Miyagi coldly states and tries to escape my hold, as though she might leave the room. I grab her hand to stop her.

"I want to know the reason."
"...Whether you say you enjoyed it or didn't, it's annoying, Sendai-san."
"What does that have to do with refusing to kiss me?"
"I think Sendai-san should get along well with Mio-san, so if you had fun, that's good, but Sendai-san is mine, so I don't like seeing you having fun with Mio-san."

Miyagi mumbles in a rush, then takes a breath.
Without looking at me, she continues in a voice neither low nor high.

"Because I'm like this, there's no need to kiss."

I grip the hand I'm holding with more strength.
Her warmth seeps into me, and I look at Miyagi.
Our eyes meet, and I can see the wrinkles between her brows.

I move to press my lips to her cheek, and again, she pushes my shoulder.
Even still, I want to kiss her, so I press my lips against her cheek.

Miyagi quietly says, "I don't like it."

Even though I can hear it, I want to kiss her, so I kiss her on the lips.

"Sendai-san, stop."

I draw her waist closer, trailing kisses along her neck.

It's no good.

I don't want to be rejected by Miyagi, and yet I cannot stop myself

from doing things that might make her say 'no.' I have to accept her words, but I can't stop myself. Stroking her hip bone and gently biting her neck, I hear another "stop" by my ear, and I cover her mouth to silence it.

There’s something wrong with me today.
I tell myself to stop.

Miyagi pushes my shoulder forcefully.

As I encircle her back with my arms, she bites my lip.
Before she can bite me hard enough to draw blood, I release her lips, and Miyagi calls out to me.

"Sendai-san."
"What?"
"The apron you received, you’ll use it, right?"

Miyagi quietly mentions, and I glance at the box on the floor containing the aprons from Mio and Utsunomiya.

"Will you use the apron, Miyagi?"
"That's what I’m asking you."
"You don’t normally wear an apron when cooking, do you?"

I shouldn't say such things.
These words deny the thoughtful gift from Mio and Utsunomiya, something I shouldn’t express.

I know this, yet today I can't control my emotions.

"I don't, but I will start using it. Maika and Mio-san went out of their way to choose it as a birthday gift."
"I see."
"Are you not going to use yours, Sendai-san?"
"...The apron wasn’t chosen by me or by you."

Saying that, I sit on the bed, and Miyagi follows suit beside me.

Our distance isn’t particularly close.
If I reach out, I can touch her, though our shoulders don't meet.

When I look at Miyagi, she returns my gaze with a troubled expression.

"…Sendai-san, since Maika and Mio-san chose the apron for you, you should use it too."

Miyagi speaks with an unusually straightforward simplicity, squeezing my hand.

In moments like this, she effortlessly states the obvious.

Friends should be cherished, and gifts from dear friends deserve care. That's how it should be, and it's something I should agree to.

Yet, the dark stain that had formed in my heart won't fade. In fact, Miyagi's words only make it grow, preventing me from agreeing straightforwardly.

Even though we're sitting side by side, even holding hands, Miyagi feels terribly distant.

"…What about the movie?"

I bring up the other birthday present.

"Are you not going, Sendai-san?"

"Do you want me to go, Miyagi?"

"…It's a birthday present."

"From Noto-senpai."

"Yes."

"Miyagi, you don't really like Noto-senpai, do you?"

"…I don't, but that's a different issue."

"Do you want to go?"

"It's not about wanting to or not. I think you should cherish these things, Sendai-san. Same with the apron."

Hearing her reasonable arguments makes me want to cover my ears, but Miyagi's voice is one I always want to hear.

My unsettled emotions begin to get lost, and I begrudgingly offer the answer Miyagi desires.

“I want to cherish them. I’ll use the apron and go to the movies.”

“Then go ahead and do it. ...Sendai-san belongs to me, and me alone, so seeing something that’s mine using something given by someone else really bothers me.
But... I think it’s better to handle these things properly.”

Miyagi's gaze falls to the floor, avoiding me. Her eyes, which don't reflect me, make it hard to breathe, so I reach for her lips.

“But I’ll always belong only to Miyagi, right?”

Touching her lips, I trace them slowly.

"That's right. Sendai-san belongs only to me."

Hearing the words I longed to hear, her gaze rises from the floor back to me, and I kiss Miyagi. Our lips meet without refusal, and we connect deeply.

Warm tongues intertwine, body temperatures blend.
But still, Miyagi feels distant, prompting a deeper kiss.

I'll always belong only to Miyagi, and I want her to always feel that way, too.

Slowly parting our lips, I touch my finger to her Plumeria earring.

“Then, Miyagi, too—”

You only belong to me, right?

The words I wanted to say remain unfinished.

Although I wish to be Miyagi's alone, I’m uncertain if Miyagi feels the same about belonging solely to me. The thought of being rejected keeps the words shriveled and lodged in my throat.

I place a faint, fleeting mark on Miyagi’s neck that will vanish by tomorrow.

"Sendai-san, what were you about to say?"

"What was it? I forgot. Anyway, let's go somewhere together first, before the day we go see the movie."

"…Somewhere, where?"

"Anywhere you want to go with me. You decide, Miyagi."

Hearing that, Miyagi frowns.

Chapter 135

Everyday Life with Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 389

I hadn't lied. The words I spoke were genuine and heartfelt.

That didn't mean, however, that I could be happy with the outcome.

I suppress the sigh trying to escape me and call out to Sendai-san.

"Good morning."
"Good morning, Miyagi."

I move to stand beside her as she's frying something in a frying pan.

"I'll help."
"It's just these scrambled eggs left, so you can sit, Miyagi."
"There's something I can do, right?"
"Then, can you handle the bread? It's almost done."

Sendai-san speaks in her usual tone. But there's something undeniably different about her today.

"Got it."

I stand in front of the toaster and, instead of looking at the bread, I watch Sendai-san. She's wearing an apron as she prepares breakfast in the shared space.

Maika and Mio-san picked out the apron, so it's only natural for Sendai-san to wear it.

The Sendai-san standing here now is the result of what I said yesterday. So, her wearing the apron should be something to be happy about.

Yet, my mind wants to reject the sight before my eyes.

I don't intend to deny what I said yesterday. I believed in what I said —that the apron should be used—and I told Sendai-san to do so. There's nothing wrong with that. Even now, I think it's a good thing that she's wearing it.

But I'm not happy about it.

The disparity between 'good' and 'happy' is trying to press in on me from both sides, crushing me.

"Miyagi, the bread's done."

Called by Sendai-san, I look at the toaster.

The timer has hit zero, and the toast is perfectly browned. I prepare a plate and place the toast on it. Arranging orange juice and setting it on the table as well, scrambled eggs and salad soon join the ensemble.

In no time, breakfast is ready. Just as I move to sit, Sendai-san tugs at my arm.

"Miyagi, does it suit me?"

She doesn't say what it was, but I know she's referring to the apron.

—I don't want to say it.

My own Sendai-san is adorned in something selected by someone other than me. It's a reality I find hard to accept.

But I have to take responsibility for my words.

"...I think it suits you."

The words that my unwillingness to accept held back spill forth, and Sendai-san smiles brightly.

"Oh, good. I'd love to see you wearing the apron too, Miyagi."
"But breakfast is already ready."
"We still have some time, no need to rush. I want to see you in the apron too, Miyagi."

Still smiling, Sendai-san hands me the apron that was draped over the back of the chair.

Yesterday, I told Sendai-san that I would "use" the apron.

If it had been a gift with no meaning, I might have tucked it away in the closet, but it was a birthday present.

While my birthday is just another ordinary day to me, it's different for others. It holds a certain significance, and not using what's gifted on such a day isn't an option.

I take the apron from Sendai-san and put it on, even though I'm not cooking.

"Cute."

Even though I hadn't asked for it, Sendai-san comments, adding "It suits you," as if on cue. Not knowing what to do, I mutter "Alright, that's enough," and move to remove the apron, but she holds onto my arm.

"I'll take it off for you."
"No, I'll do it myself."
"Come on, just leave it to me."

With a cheerful demeanor, Sendai-san unties the apron strings in the front. Before I know it, she's removed the apron, and I step on her foot.

"I said I'll do it myself."
"Oh, come on, Miyagi, do mine."

Ignoring my protests, Sendai-san guides my hand to her apron strings, urging me to untie them. My hands free Sendai-san from the apron that makes her not quite herself, making her truly mine again. I grasp her clothing, drawing her close, my lips nearing her neck before I pull away.

I can't.

If I touch her now, I'd want to leave a mark that will never fade.

"What's next?"

Asked quietly, I hang Sendai-san's apron on the back of the chair.

"We're eating breakfast."
"Breakfast can wait a bit. Let's continue."

Her voice wasn't bright, but neither was it as dreary as a cloudy sky —and with that voice, Sendai-san's lips drew closer. I try to push her shoulder away, but she grabs my hand.

Without a chance to close my eyes, her lips lightly press against mine, then pull away.
Then, immediately, she attaches them again.
Unlike the first kiss, the tip of her tongue brushes my lips.

I step on Sendai-san's foot, and with her hand still holding mine, I press against her stomach.

"You're stingy, Miyagi."
"I'm not stingy. The food will get cold, let's eat quickly."
"Okay, okay."

Despite her words, Sendai-san doesn't move from in front of me.

Her hand reaches for my neck, her fingertips tracing and then pausing.

"The mark's gone, huh?"

In a flat voice, she remarks as she lets her hand drop.

Yesterday, she left a mark without asking. But it was faint, disappearing by the time I woke up.

Sendai-san lacks resolve. She's always been that way.

Yet that's not something I dislike about her.

"What about yours, Sendai-san?"
"It's gone."

I grab her hand, inspecting her wrist.
Sure enough, the mark I left has vanished.

—I should have left a mark earlier.

Such thoughts cross my mind, but I quickly dismiss them.

Today we have university.

While her wrists are hard to see, they're not completely hidden, so I think it's better if there aren't any marks. Leaving a mark on her neck is even more out of the question. With Sendai-san's four-leaf clover, there's no need for marks.

Yet my fingers press hard on where the mark once was.

"Even if you wear the apron or it suits you, Sendai-san, you belong to me alone."

As I release my fingers, her skin turns white then quickly returns to normal. I bring my lips closer, pressing them gently together.
I run the tip of my tongue along her, then lightly graze her with my teeth.
On the verge of leaving a mark that would last, I pull away at once.

"Let's eat."

Seeing Sendai-san wearing the apron in the morning makes me want to do unnecessary things. I think it's best to return to our usual day quickly.

"Alright, let's eat before it goes cold."

Sendai-san squeezes my hand tightly, then releases it and sits down.
I take a seat too, directing my gaze to the calico cat chopstick rest.

The table remains the same as always.

Raising my eyes, I meet Sendai-san's gaze.

"Let's eat."

Our voices united, we spread butter and jam on our bread. Taking a bite of the cooling scrambled eggs, I chew on the bread.

"Miyagi, you remember our promise, right?"

As if speaking of the most mundane thing, Sendai-san brings salad to her mouth.

"Promise?"
"About going somewhere."
"That wasn't a promise."

Yesterday, Sendai-san had invited me, "Let's go somewhere together." But that's all. I asked where we were going but didn't agree to go together.

"So you're not going?"

From across the table, a slightly lower voice chimes in. I take a sip of orange juice from the calico cat mug before responding, "I didn't say that."

"So, does that mean you'll go?"
"Sendai-san, shut up. Just eat quietly, please."

I flick the calico cat on the mug with my fingertip.

Anywhere you want to go with me. You decide, Miyagi.

That's what she said, making it difficult to turn the discussion about going somewhere into a "promise."

It's more comfortable for me to stay at home than go out, and I'm clueless about places that Sendai-san would genuinely want to go. I could suggest an aquarium or a zoo, but if those were where she wanted to go, she wouldn't ask me to choose a destination.

So, perhaps, choosing somewhere different is wiser.

"Miyagi, at least chat with me for a little while."

Her voice is light as she nudges my foot beneath the table. Truly, Sendai-san can be such a pain

"I'll let you know once I've decided where to go, so just stay quiet."

I have no doubt that, if it's somewhere I've chosen, Sendai-san would enjoy it, regardless of the place.

That’s why I can’t pick a place lightly.

"Got it. I’m looking forward to it," she says with a cheerful tone, then takes a bite of her bread.

Everyday Life with Sendai-san (II)

Part 390

Aquariums, zoos, and movie theaters.

I must choose a place other than those three for the outing with Sendai-san.

I've been in the university lecture room for a little over ten minutes, staring intently at the key case Sendai-san gave me for my birthday. A Borzoi like Sendai-san is on the case, guarding my keys. Just looking at it makes me want to talk, but much like the black cat plush she gifted me, it won't respond or offer any hints about where to go out with her.

Of course, talking to a key case in a university would seem insane, but I feel an urge to talk to it, hoping for a clue.

—This is no good.

I tuck the mute Borzoi case into my bag and press my palms flat against the desk. I regret not lingering at home a bit longer to relax. Sendai-san, with her endless excuses for kissing and cuddling, made me leave hastily even though there was no need to rush. I have too much time on my hands now.

Maika hasn't arrived yet.

With no one to speak with, my mind is obsessing over picking a place for the outing with Sendai-san, a choice that inexplicably fell to me.

How did it come to this?

It's been less than two years since I've shared a home with her, but she has embedded herself firmly in my consciousness. We're only sharing a place until we graduate from university, so we haven't even reached the halfway point — and yet, the share of my life she occupies is far too large.

This doesn't seem like a healthy thing.

I can't imagine what might happen if someone who dominates my thoughts like this were no longer around.

Yet, the halfway point will inevitably arrive, and graduation isn't so far off in the future.

On our high school graduation day, I couldn't let go of Sendai-san. That tenuous bond that should have been severed stayed connected, leading us to this day.

But no matter how firmly you tie those threads, they can sometimes snap in one cut, drifting apart. Humans can use scissors to sever knots or even throw the entire thread away as if it were nothing.

Feelings are invisible, elusive things, even less reliable than a knot. I'm not saying that they aren't worth believing in because you can't see them, but I do think that they are extremely unreliable.

Living with Sendai-san for a year and a half showed me she's someone who spends birthdays with me, someone who stays by my side. She transformed my home from a place of solitude to one of shared moments, granting me the routine visits to aquariums and zoos that I rarely experienced as a child.

With this in mind, it seems natural for my head to be filled with thoughts of Sendai-san, and it also seems normal for me to worry about where to go out with her.

If we were to go out, I want Sendai-san to have fun, and I want her to be happy.

Perhaps it was inevitable that I'd started thinking like this, and maybe my worries were completely justified. Yet, I can't think of a place where she might truly enjoy herself.

"Hmm…"

With my face buried on the desk, I clench and unclench my hands. Yanking at my hair and groaning "hmm" once more, I hear Maika's voice.

"Morning, Shiori."

I lift my face, responding with a “Morning.”

Maika sits beside me, smiling gently, “Yesterday was fun, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. Thanks for the apron. I used it today.”

“Oh, did you? So then, did you make breakfast?”

“Sendai-san did."

"And you?"

"By the time I got to help, it was already done."

"So, it was Sendai-san who wore the apron then?"

"Yeah. It suited her. I tried mine on too, even though I didn’t cook. I’ll start using it from now on."

Sharing the truth brightens Maika’s face instantly. With a bright, understanding smile, Maika said, "I'm glad," and continued.

“I'm kind of relieved. I worried about it, you know—choosing an apron because Mio-san suggested something you could use might be better. But people have different tastes when it comes to what they wear, so I wondered if it would be okay.”

“It’s fine. I like it. Truly, thank you.”

"I'm glad you liked it."
Her voice is light and lively.

Whether it’s something that disappears once you eat it, something that’s used up once you use it, or even something you just keep in your room.
I don’t want to see Sendai-san happily treasuring anything she’s gotten from someone other than me.

Still, I didn't want to do anything to make Maika sad either.

Anything involving Sendai-san becomes inherently complicated.
Even a simple joy of receiving a gift burdens my heart.

Everything would have been simpler if it were just me who received it.

I would have been able to truly be happy about receiving the apron, and say so without any lies. But reality can't be so straightforward.

I glance at Maika, grappling with the guilt in the back of my mind.

"By the way, Maika, you and Mio-san really get along well. I knew you joined her for mixers, but I didn't expect you two would pick out a present together," I remark.

Maika and Mio-san—a duo that might have graduated without ever crossing paths if they'd been in the same high school—bring unexpected developments for Sendai-san and me.

"Mio-san is incredibly forward, reaching out often, and before I knew it, we became close. Oh, and Mio-san wants you to call her Mio," Maika shares.

I don't know why they're talking about this behind my back, but something "unexpected" is happening again. I can't help but feel like keeping Maika and Mio-san together might spell trouble for me.

"Aren't you going to call her Mio?" I counter with a safe question.

"For some reason, I've been stuck on using '-san'. But maybe I'll start calling her Mio if you do."

"I'm stuck on using 'san' too."

Smiling in response to Maika's attempt to involve me, I try to shift the conversation away from its negative trajectory. But as these things go, it tends to spiral into worse directions, with Maika touching on things I wish she wouldn't recall.

"It's like how you call Sendai-san 'san' despite all this time sharing a room. Why not just call her 'Hazuki'?"

"Hmm, I'm not calling her that yet."

Sendai-san's name is mine, and now I sometimes call her "Hazuki." But I only call her that when I want to confirm that "Sendai Hazuki" belongs to me alone.

"Yet, so someday you might?" she probes.

"Who knows."

Though I want to call her by her name openly, I simultaneously don't want to.

I know that openly saying such things would only stoke Maika's curiosity, so I offer an ambiguous smile.

"Names are there to be used," she teases.

My heart aches sharply.

Maika will still call her "Sendai-san" until I start calling her "Hazuki."

This fact was one I extracted from Sendai-san, and Maika believes I'm unaware of it.

"So, if I start calling Sendai-san 'Hazuki' like you do with Mio-san, will you follow suit?" I ask.

"Well, maybe I'll call her that if you do. Though it doesn't seem like you'll be switching anytime soon," Maika replies with a chuckle.

That's not the case, but I leave it like that. I have no intention of telling a lie, I can't think of anything else to say.

"By the way, Shiori, what are you having for dinner tonight?"

"Uh, instant noodles," I admit, caught off-guard by Maika's sudden shift in topic.

"You can't do that; use the apron properly!" she scolds playfully.

"I'm by myself today, and I'm too lazy to cook."

"Today is Sendai-san's tutoring day, right?" she confirms.

"Yeah."

Ideally, I'd want to eat the hamburg steak made by Sendai-san. But

I'm not cruel enough to demand that she cook one after her job, and making hamburg steaks isn't my forte. Instant noodles will suffice for today.

"When will Shiori's apron be used?"

"It'll get plenty of use tomorrow, I think."

"Hmm, well, then that's fine," Maika declares with a theatrical tone, flashing a satisfied smile.

Everyday Life with Sendai-san (III)

Part 391

For dinner, I opted for ready-made curry and a salad from the convenience store. It's an improvement over cup noodles, but I'm certain Sendai-san would frown at such a menu.

Today, when all I really want to eat is a hamburg steak made by Sendai-san, I can't bring myself to make and eat anything else.

I finish the serviceable yet unremarkable curry, then proceed to wash the dishes.

Just a single plate. Along with a glass and a spoon.

The dishes, which were so few that I didn't even need to put on an apron to wash them, were done in no time, and I returned to my room.

Though I didn't get the chance to use the apron today, just like I told Maika, I hope I'll get to use it tomorrow instead.

The unease clouding my heart can't be neatly folded and put away like an apron. Yet it's not a problem I can ignore forever. I can only believe that, by continuously using the apron, the unease inside me will eventually get compressed into something small enough to be stored away on the shelves of my heart.

I release a small sigh.

There's still time before Sendai-san returns. I decide to work on the report due in two days, spreading my materials across the table.

At this time, Sendai-san is probably teaching her tutoring student—.

I pull the tissue box shaped like a crocodile closer and hold its hand.

Since entering college, I've started studying earnestly again, like I did as a child. It's because of Sendai-san that this version of me exists. Afternoons that I used to spend alone became shared

moments, and solitary, endless breaks became shared with someone else, encouraging me to study, leading to this very day.

I wish I could remain a university student forever.

If, after the second year, I could somehow start again, being a second-year student at nineteen and twenty repeatedly, surely it would be delightful. I'd have time to leisurely think about where to go with Sendai-san.

As my mind drifts to an impossible wish that can never be realized, I tighten my grip on the crocodile's hand before letting go. I then turn my gaze to my study materials, flipping the page.

After a gentle pat on the crocodile's head, I dive into my report.

Nearly two hours pass as I diligently work, and a soft knocking sound reaches my ears. I stand up and open the door to see Sendai-san standing there, saying "I'm home."

"Welcome back. Have you eaten?"
"I had dinner before heading to work. Can I come in?"

She asks with a smile, and I respond with "Sure."

Sendai-san enters, sitting on the floor with her back against the bed. As I settle down beside her, she inquires, "Working on a report?"

"Yes."
"I have something to discuss. Is now okay?"
"Sure."

As I respond, Sendai-san lowers her gaze to the floor. After a brief "Hmm," she looks up at me.

"Do you remember the conversation we had with Utsunomiya at last year's university school festival?"

"What conversation?"

I vividly recall the time when Sendai-san decided to come to my university's school festival. Maika easily took photos of us, and Sendai-san, getting carried away, captured many more. It left quite an impression on me.

The “conversation with Utsunomiya” that Sendai-san is referring to must be about me and Maika attending her university’s school festival this year.

Though I'm aware of this, and with the festival approaching, it seems this is what she's referring to, I find myself reluctant to confirm it.

"This year, Miyagi and Utsunomiya are coming to my university's festival," she states, voicing the words I didn't want to hear.

"Did we really have that talk?"
"Yes, you remember, don't you?"

Instead of answering with a yes, I just nod.

"Great. Also, Mio wants to come along. Is that okay?"
"How did Mio-san come into this?"
"When I mentioned the festival at university, Mio asked if you and Utsunomiya would be attending. She already had plans with some club members, which seems to be the main event for her, but she really wants to meet you two, even if just for a little while."
"...I see. Well, tell her not to push herself too hard."
"She insisted I inform her once you two arrive, so I’m sure she’ll come anyway."

As Sendai-san quickly voices this, leaning against the bed, she takes hold of my hand.

Her hand, neither warm nor cold, presses against mine with a firm grip.

When I gave a light tug to pull away, her fingers intertwined with mine, interlacing even more intimately than before.

"That's all for the festival. Now, there's one more thing."

Still holding my hand, Sendai-san says, pressing her shoulder to mine as she distances herself from the bed.

"I'm not listening."
"Just listen."

She declares firmly, closing the gap between us until "close" isn't adequate to describe it; the words "pressed together" would be more appropriate, with half of my body being taken over by Sendai-san.

"...What is it now?" I ask, my voice growing quieter due to the proximity.

"Remember our plan to go out together? Let's set a date before deciding the destination."
"Eh, Why?"
"If we don’t set a date, you’ll never decide."

Sendai-san said with a radiant smile still in place, and and I pull back our joined hands, loosening our intertwined fingers.

"That’s not true."
"But you look like you won’t figure it out."
"It’s just that making a decision on the date would be a hassle while I’m still deciding."
"We can just postpone if we need to. How about this weekend? Or maybe next?"
"Next week is too soon."
"When’s good for you?"
"...Maybe in three months?"
"Next Sunday it is, then."

Sendai-san is pushy.

Even though she asked me a question, she’s already set on the answer. Despite my hesitation and wandering within the maze of my thoughts, she bulldozes through the walls, guiding me straight to the goal. She won't allow me to stop or take a different path.

And yet, there are times when she patiently waits for me as I drag my feet. Even if she starts to go on ahead, before her back can disappear from my sight, she always turns around to look at me.

Thus, reluctantly, I find myself accepting her words.

“If you make hamburg steak, then next week sounds good.”

If she’s making me rush something that doesn't need to be rushed, I’ll at least make this small request.

“Right now?”
“We’ve already eaten, so not now.”

Tomorrow or the day after is fine. If she makes delicious hamburg steak, I'll decide on a destination by next Sunday.

Though where that will be, I don't know yet.

Chapter 136

Miyagi's Thoughts on Me (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 392

I hear the sound of something being tapped.

Tap, tap.

I focus my ears on the faint sound.

But soon, my consciousness starts to drift away.

The faint sound becomes even softer, threatening to disappear before growing louder again.

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Just as my consciousness begins to resurface, the devil of drowsiness tries to drag me back down. My mind, on the verge of awakening, teeters on the brink of falling back into sleep.

Tap.

Once more, I hear the sound, and a voice seems to chase after it, pulling my consciousness away from the clutches of sleep.

"Sendai-san, open up."

—Miyagi.

Though I'm sleepy, my eyes flutter open.

I force myself out of bed, which is trying to hold me back, and open the door.

With a sleepy voice, I mutter, "Good morning," to which Miyagi, standing in the shared space, responds, "Good morning."

"What time is it right now?"

"A little before seven."

Her voice is clear and distinct, unlike mine.

"Isn't it early for a Sunday? Did something happen?"

Even though there's no university today, I had no intention of sleeping until noon, but there's no urgent reason to wake in a hurry either.

Miyagi is the same way; on a typical Sunday, she would still be sleeping. She wouldn’t wake me up at this hour without a reason.

"There's something happening, so you need to get up."

Miyagi speaks in a slightly lower tone.

But since there are no wrinkles between her brows, she shouldn't be in a bad mood.

"What's happening?"

"We're going out today."

"Going out? Where to?"

"We promised to go out together. Did you forget?"

"Eh, wasn't that promise for next Sunday?"

On Monday night, we decided on a day to go somewhere together.

It was definitely set for a Sunday, but it was supposed to be next Sunday, and not today.

It’s a week early, no matter how you slice it.

"We're going today, so get ready after breakfast."

For some reason, Miyagi is unusually enthusiastic. It’s hard to believe she’s the same person who answered “Maybe in three

months” when I asked when we were going out together.

"This is too sudden."

"I woke you up early, so you have plenty of time, right?"

"True, I do have time, but why did you decide to go today?"

"If we stick to the plan for next week, Sendai-san will have time to prepare something for me. Like... my clothes."

Ah, that makes sense.

The reason for moving the plan up by a week is understandable, but Miyagi is underestimating me. I can prepare for her even now.

"Well, I was planning to dress you up like a doll, so I was going to prepare, but... Since you woke me up early, I can still get ready now, can I?"

Among the clothes I've recently bought, there are several that she can wear even if the size is different. To put it simply, there are clothes I want to see Miyagi try on.

So I can pull them out quickly without needing to spend time preparing.

"There's no way that's okay."

Miyagi, unaware of my clothing situation, coldly replies.

"Too bad. Then let's do it next week."

"If it’s next week, I won’t go."

"If you insist that much, today is fine, but have you decided where we're going?"

"Sendai-san will decide."

"But you promised you'd decide, Miyagi."

That's not what we agreed on.

The promise was for Miyagi to decide where she wanted to go with me.

"Sendai-san will decide. ...I want you to pick the clothes I'll wear when we go to the movies together, so take me to a store with that kind of thing."

She wants me to choose clothes for the day we plan to use the movie gift card from Noto-senpai.

There's no other meaning to Miyagi's words. But it wasn't at all what I expected, and I'm left speechless.

Miyagi, of all people, asking me to choose clothes for her to go out in.

Miyagi, who just refused to be my dress-up doll, saying something like that.

I never imagined this.

Facing Miyagi, who far exceeded my expectations, I could only stare at her.

"I don't know where to find the clothes that you would like, so you should choose the store, Sendai-san."

Miyagi said, stepping on my foot lightly, and continued speaking.

"You like that kind of thing, don't you, Sendai-san? ...You seemed to have so much fun picking out clothes before, too."

She speaks in a low tone, putting a little more pressure on the foot pinning mine.

The "before" she mentioned must refer to when we went to pick out clothes for Utsunomiya. I remember that day well.

Miyagi said she was "jealous."

It was because I was choosing clothes for someone other than Miyagi, and she was in a bad mood that day. Yet, Miyagi remembered how I enjoyed picking out the clothes and brought it up today. I'm sure she wants to make today enjoyable.

"So, this is the place Miyagi wants to go with me, right?"
"I thought about it carefully, so no complaints."

Since Miyagi put thought into it for me, I won't complain.

"What kind of clothes should I choose?"

There are many clothes I want to see Miyagi wear.

And since today we can actually go out together, even if I can't buy all of them, just getting her to try them on is enough to make the trip worthwhile.

"Of course, you can’t pick just anything. I’ll decide whether to buy it or not in the end. So if you understand the rules, hurry up and eat. I’ve already prepared it."

I don't mind if there are restrictions on the clothes we buy.

Actually, it might even be better if nothing gets decided right away with all the “not this one, not that one”. I can have her try on clothes until we find ones Miyagi likes, and enjoy a fashion show along the way.

"...You know, Miyagi—"

"What?"

"You're really interesting."

"Are you making fun of me?"

Miyagi's voice is so grumpy that you wouldn't think she was the one who invited me to go out with her today.

"No, I'm just saying it’s fun to be with you."

I grab Miyagi's hand and hold it tightly.

Yet Miyagi quickly shakes off my hand, her brows knitting together.

"You don't need to talk about that. Come on, hurry over here."

With her words, she tugs at my sweatshirt.

"I'll get changed, just give me a moment."

"No need to change. The food will get cold, so hurry up and eat."

With that, she tugs on my sweatshirt, which are serving as pajamas, even harder, stretching it slightly. Pulled along by Miyagi, I step out into the shared space and close the door.

"Miyagi, you're so stingy."

"It's Sendai-san's fault for not getting up early."

Miyagi, who unilaterally decided today's plan and forced me to get up early, irresponsibly states. Yet, I don't feel bad about it. My head feels so clear that it's hard to believe I just woke up.

Though I didn't have time to check the weather outside, my mood is so good I'm certain today must be a beautiful day.

"What's for breakfast?"

I ask in a naturally bouncy voice, and she replies, "Ham and fried eggs."

"Sounds delicious."

"It's the same as always."

With that, Miyagi releases her grip on my sweatshirt.

Miyagi's Thoughts on Me (II)

Part 393

The "same breakfast as always" that Miyagi prepared was as delicious as ever.

The yolk of the fried eggs, which sometimes used to break, rarely does so now. Recently, they often come out as perfectly half-cooked. The ham and bread are toasted just right as well. I realize that just because she doesn't do it often doesn't mean Miyagi is incapable of cooking.

She’s usually so meticulous about little things, but when she cooks, she gets sloppy and just eyeballs the measurements. I wish she’d fix that, but then again, it might be a bit sad if she lost that carefree part of herself, so maybe it's okay for her to stay as she is.

However, she should definitely get rid of her habit of denying the word "cute."

"I told you not to go all cute."

Miyagi opens her door but doesn't step out of the room, speaking with an unenthusiastic voice.

It's her usual response, but once in a while, I wish she'd say something different.

"I'm just doing a bit of makeup."

Since Miyagi prepared breakfast unusually early for a Sunday, we could eat slowly and change clothes leisurely with plenty of time left. Even if I put on some light makeup for her before heading out, we'd still be on time.

"I don't want it. You don't have to."

Her voice carries a strong resolve.

"You want me to help you choose an outfit for the movie, right?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Then let me do your makeup. I want to match the clothes to the makeup when i pick them out."

"So, you're saying you'll do my makeup for the movie outing too?"

"Of course. You're cute as you are, but since we're going out, I'll make you even cuter."

"You don't have to."

"Miyagi, at times like this, listen to the person picking your clothes. Clothes and makeup go together, so just quietly lend me your face."

"...Sendai-san, you're not being fair."

As Miyagi mutters this, she tries to close the door, so I grab her wrist.

"I can't pick clothes for you like this. Just let me do your makeup."

As Miyagi says, I'm being unfair.

I could choose clothes for her even without the makeup, but I was pretending I couldn't. However, Miyagi seems willing to indulge my whims today, so I pulled on the wrist I was holding.

"...Just five minutes then."

Sounding resigned, Miyagi steps out of her room.

"Ten minutes."

I smile, and Miyagi gently kicks at my leg. Despite that, she comes to my room, sitting cutely on the floor.

Since I'd prepared beforehand, all the necessary items were on the table.

I push Miyagi's bangs up with a hairband and start applying makeup. She grumbles about this and that, but she doesn't run away.

She was so cute, obediently letting me do her makeup even while she complained.

I'd love to tell her that, but if I did, she'd likely leave the room, even though I was only halfway through. So I kept it to myself.

Just before the ten-minute mark passes into fifteen, Miyagi pushes against my stomach and says, "That's enough, right?" Realizing that continuing is pointless, I finish by applying lipstick to her lips.

"Sendai-san, are you done now?"

Before I can respond, Miyagi removes the hairband and stands up.

She's wearing simple denim pants and a blouse that suited her well. The light makeup complimented her outfit perfectly.

"So cute."

There's no reason to keep my thoughts to myself now that I've finished the makeup, so I simply said what I saw.

"Sendai-san, get ready. We're leaving soon."

Miyagi acted as if she hadn't heard me.

"We're planning on eating out for lunch, right?"

It wouldn’t be unlike Miyagi to decide to wrap up our shopping before noon and come home, so I made sure to ask.

"...If you don't want to eat, we don't have to."

"Let's eat something delicious together."

I smile at Miyagi, who hadn't suggested eating at home.

"Then I'll head back to my room. Call me when you're ready."

"It's fine. I’m ready to go now."

Though I had breakfast in my sweatpants, I’d already changed into a skirt and a sweater, so all I had to do was grab my bag.

"I'll go get my bag."

Saying this, Miyagi leaves the room. I step out as well, waiting in the shared space, and soon Miyagi returns with her bag, and we both head outside. As we walk down the stairs towards the station, I ask Miyagi.

"I can choose our where we're going, right?"

"I don't know what place is best, so Sendai-san, you decide."

"Then is it okay to go to the place where we chose Utsunomiya's clothes last time?"

Miyagi hesitates for a moment, her voice dropping slightly.

"That's fine, but..."

"But what?"

"There's nothing after 'but.'"

She mutters quietly, taking a big step forward.

I match her step, walking alongside her.

"Got it. I thought of other places too, but Miyagi, you wouldn't want to go to a bunch of different stores, would you?"

"Of course not. I won't go to a bunch of stores."

Miyagi's reply was exactly what I had expected.

That's why I decided our destination would be the fashion building where we chose Utsunomiya's clothes.

"I'm not counting the stores inside. The building itself counts as one place, so we'll browse through until we find something nice."

There are several clothing stores in the building. I suppose it's a convenient rule for me, but it saves Miyagi from having to walk more than necessary, and I think she'll find something she likes.

"What, that's unfair."

"It's not unfair. You can go around to all the stores inside, so you have to try some clothes on."

"Sendai-san, you're a liar."

"What part of that's a lie?"

"Your entire existence."

Miyagi retorts coldly, quickening her pace.

She begins walking a bit ahead. I increase my pace too, but Miyagi speeds up again, so I grab her hand.

"What's your budget?"

Holding her hand, I ask her an important question for choosing clothes.

"Let go of my hand."

"I'll let go if you tell me your budget."

"Nothing too expensive."

Miyagi answers honestly, so I reluctantly let go of her hand.

"Got it. Is there anything you absolutely don't want to wear?"

"...I don't want anything too cute."

"Alright, nothing too expensive or overly cute."

This and that, that one, too...

I know I can't have her try on everything at random, and it would inconvenience the stores as well.

But I do want her to try all sorts of different clothes, though with her answer, I realize if I try to make her wear clothes that are too cute, she'll likely go straight home. It's what I expected, but still a bit disappointing.

I can't simply impose all my desires on her.

What's important is choosing clothes that suit Miyagi.

We can't buy an endless supply of clothes, and Miyagi has her preferences.

Something cute, or mature, or perhaps trendy.

I find myself wanting to pick out clothes for Miyagi that she's never worn before, but there's a risk she'd only wear them for the movie and then let them gather dust in the closet forever.

Instead, it seems wiser to choose something more classic that Miyagi might wear to university as well.

Still, when it comes to trying things on, there could be room to play a bit—as long as Miyagi wasn't completely opposed to it

"Sendai-san, stop staring at me and watch where you're going," Miyagi says with a bit of annoyance in her voice.

I respond calmly, "It's fine, I'm watching ahead too."

As we pass through the ticket gates and board the train, we continue our idle chatter. Miyagi doesn't say much, but that's normal, so it doesn't bother me.

I gaze out the window at the passing scenery. The city, unchanged, reflects the abundant sunlight, glittering brightly. With Miyagi by my side, everything I see seems to sparkle, and the time that would otherwise be dull until reaching our destination becomes something special.

Miyagi changes my world just by being there.

"Sendai-san, do we get off at the next stop?" she asks.

"Yes, we do."

The train stops soon after, and we step onto the platform. We get swept along with the crowd, pass through the gates, and reach our destination.

"Is the fashion show about to begin?"

Inside the building, there are numerous clothing shops. Although we can't visit them all, we can probably try on a fair number of outfits.

"You're so annoying. Stop saying weird things," Miyagi grumbles, sounding thoroughly annoyed as she nudges my arm.

"Come on, just pretend you’re a model and follow me."

"No way. Let's just pick something normally."

"Alright, let's start by picking out a skirt, then."

"Are we definitely picking a skirt for the movies?"

"Definitely."

I give her a smile, and a wrinkle forms on Miyagi's brow.

"... I’m not trying on a bunch of different clothes."

"Don't worry, I'm not making you try on a hundred or two hundred outfits."

Miyagi wanted to make me happy and considered what I would like. It makes me glad to know that she had put a lot of thought into this time.

So, to smooth out the frown on Miyagi’s face, I wanted her to have a good time, too.

"This store has a lot of simple clothes, so I think you'll like it," I say, pulling gently on Miyagi's arm as she stands rooted in place.

Miyagi's Thoughts on Me (III)

Part 394

The first one was a long flared skirt.
It could be styled for a more mature look or a casual one, depending on what she paired it with.

It was easy to match with the clothes Miyagi already owned and comfortable to move in. Since Miyagi often wore this kind of skirt when I dress her up, she quietly tried it on.

The second one was a pleated skirt.
This one was also easy to pair and comfortable to move in, so she smoothly tried it on as well.

Both were cute, and I wanted to pick out a top to go with them, but if I'd asked her to try on a top with the skirt, Miyagi's frown would likely have deepened, so I refrained. Instead, after she finished trying on the second one, I handed her a third skirt.

"Sendai-san. Once I try this on, can I stop?"

Miyagi accepted the gathered skirt with a hint of annoyance in her voice.

"We just got here."
"It's been about three hours already."
"I don't think it's even been an hour. You were the one who wanted me to choose your clothes for the movie, so why don't you try on some more?"
"I know, but this one isn't much different from the last one."
"It's very different. This one flares out from the waist, see?"
"I think the only thing that's different is the length."

Miyagi said indifferently, closing the dressing room curtain. I'm grateful that she was willing to go through the trouble of trying on skirts even while complaining, but it seems she didn't like trying on clothes very much.

I imagined a Miyagi who would smile and twirl in the skirt she was

trying on.
Even though I know no such Miyagi exists, she was making an even more difficult face than I'd expected.

If she were with Utsunomiya, the outcome might have been different, but I had no way of knowing how Miyagi is when I'm not around. All I can see is this Miyagi, trying on clothes with a reluctant face.

The road ahead is difficult.

Such words come to mind as I contemplate how difficult it might be to make sure Miyagi enjoys herself. But giving up isn't an option.

"Sendai-san, I'm done."

The curtain opened, and Miyagi appeared in the gathered skirt.

"Cute. It suits you."
"Sendai-san, you always say that."
"I can't help it, it's the truth."

I wasn't lying at all.

Cute.
It suits you.

Those words were made for Miyagi.

Though I could gather all the words within me and reconstruct them to glorify Miyagi, if I did that to Miyagi, who already had a stern expression on her face, this fun activity of trying on clothes will undoubtedly come to an end.

"All three of them looked good on you, but I want to see more skirts, so let's check out some other stores, okay?"

I smiled gently as I tell her.

"Eh, no way, let's just choose from these three."
"We still have plenty of time, so bear with me a bit longer. For now, change back."

Despite her dissatisfied expression, Miyagi closed the dressing room

curtain. I reassured her that there's no rush, taking a few minutes to browse the store while waiting. Miyagi emerged, now in her clothes.

"How many more times do I have to try things on?"

Miyagi asked with a sigh as she puts on her shoes.

"Not that many, don't worry."

I replied lightly, and we returned the skirts before heading to the next store.

"Sendai-san, you really love picking out clothes, don't you?"
"I guess so. I'd pick your outfits every day if I could."
"Absolutely not."

Though her voice was cold, she continued to walk by my side. We match our strides, moving forward at the same pace.

"You're so stingy, Miyagi."
"I'm letting you choose my clothes today, so I'm not stingy."
"That's true. Today, Miyagi is being very kind."

When I said that, Miyagi's pace slowed slightly. I slowed down to match her, and a small, muffled voice came from her.

"Sendai-san, you're such an erotic demon."
"I'm not doing anything like that today, though."
"You always say unnecessary things."

Miyagi disregarded my words, so I ask, "What unnecessary things?"

"Things like 'cute' or 'it suits you.'"
"But it's the truth."

Miyagi didn't respond. She didn't call me a liar either. Yet, she silently tried to enter a different store, not our intended destination, prompting me to catch her hand.

"Miyagi, you should compliment my good qualities too, not just my bad points."
"There aren't any."
"Isn't it a bit harsh to answer so fast?"

I let out an exaggerated sigh, pulling Miyagi along. As we slowly started walking again, Miyagi spoke in a flat voice.

"Fine, you're beautiful and kind."
"Eh?"

Her words were so unexpected that I let out a sound, and the hand I was holding slipped from my grasp.

"You're seriously picking out clothes for me."

Miyagi mumbled, adding, "If you find something you like doing besides picking out clothes, let me know."

"Got it."

I replied succinctly, pointing ahead as I tell Miyagi, "The next store is over there." However, the next store didn't seem to be to Miyagi's liking. When we got to the entrance, she refused to go in, saying, "It's too cute."

—I figured.

The store I intended had a lot of frills and lace—overly girly—for Miyagi's usual tastes. I had expected her to refuse, but her rejection was stronger than I'd anticipated, and she wouldn't even step inside.

"You don't like this kind of stuff?"
"Not at all."

Miyagi has a strong distaste for the word "cute," but I think she would look great in "too-cute clothes" that she doesn't normally wear.

I wanted to at least have her try things on, but knowing she genuinely disliked it, I gave up.

"Okay, let's try another store."

As I start walking, Miyagi follows. We head to a store with more subdued, yet still cute, options she might compromise on. Before entering, I asked, "How about this one?" and got an "Alright" in response.

Inside, we looked for a skirt.
I found a few she'd look good in, but she rejected a pleated frill skirt.

"Then how about this long skirt? Just try it on."

I handed her a seemingly plain skirt. She accepted reluctantly and headed into the dressing room, closing the curtain. But even after five minutes, the fitting room curtain still didn't open.

"Miyagi?"

I called out, but there's no response.

"Miyagi, did you put the skirt on?"

My second call received a resentful reply, "Sendai-san, that's not fair."

"What's not fair?"
"My legs are so visible."
"There’s just a little slit in it, right?"
"It's not just a little."
"Let me see if it's really 'a little,' so open up."

Upon my urging, the curtain slowly parted to reveal an entirely unamused Miyagi.

"Your legs aren’t that visible, and it suits you."

The skirt she was wearing featured a side slit up to the knee, but it didn't show too much of her leg.

Though it was a style she wouldn't normally wear, the glimpse of her leg was strikingly beautiful, and I wished she would wear it every day. Still, I understood why Miyagi was complaining.

"Wait here a moment."

I turned away from Miyagi, heading to fetch a new skirt.

"If you didn’t like that skirt, try this one on instead."

I handed her a tiered skirt that wasn't overly sweet in style, to which

she replied, "This is the last one, okay?"

"You're so stingy, Miyagi."

Ignoring my remark, she closed the curtain again. A few minutes later, it opened, and an expressionless Miyagi handed back the skirt with the slit while wearing the tiered skirt as I requested.

"It's cute. This looks good on you too. Which one do you like better?"

I showed her the skirt she had just handed me, causing her brow to furrow as if she was tackling a tough exam question.

I don't want either.

She looked like she was about to say something like that, but after giving the skirt she was wearing a light twirl, she acquiesced.

"If I have to pick, then the one I'm wearing now."

She looked as bitter as if she'd just swallowed a burnt piece of toast, but I was pleased she made a decision. Still, ending the try-on session with a begrudgingly chosen skirt leaves me somewhat unsatisfied.

"I see. Since we have time, would you like to try one more?"

"I'm not trying any more. I said this was the last one. Choose from what I've already tried on."

Miyagi said with a sullen look on her face.

"Hmm, let's see."

I recalled the five skirts Miyagi had tried on.

If we're going to buy one, it should be something that matched well with the clothes she already had and is comfortable for her to wear.

"Shall we return to the first store?"

I suggested with a smile, and she responded with an "Alright." We head back to the initial store.

"I think this one is nice."

I hand her the pleated skirt she had tried on second. All three had suited her, but if I had to choose one, I wanted it to be something she hadn't worn much before.

"If Sendai-san says so, it's fine. I'll go buy it."

"Okay, I'll wait here."

Taking the skirt from me, Miyagi headed to the register.

It was a good day. Even the time waiting for her like this is enjoyable. I could wait for hours.

Yet, it's much more fun having her by my side, so my heart leaped when Miyagi returned so quickly.

"Sendai-san, I bought it."

"Well then, shall we go?"

As we stepped out of the store, I paused.

"Hey, Miyagi. There was another one that really suited you. Would it be okay if I buy it?"

I asked, and Miyagi looked at me suspiciously.

Chapter 137

About Sendai-san (I)

(Miyagi PoV)
Part 395

“...When you say you’ll buy it, is it a skirt that Sendai-san will wear?"

Sendai-san definitely asked, 'Would it be okay if I buy it?'

Today is the day she chooses clothes for me, but if Sendai-san wants to buy something for herself, that’s perfectly fine. That's a given.

However, before she asked "Is it okay if I buy it?" she also mentioned, "Miyagi, there was another one that really suited you."

Strange. Odd.

If she found a skirt she liked, one she wants to wear herself, and she buys it for herself, I wouldn't mind. But her buying a skirt she thinks would suit me is a different story entirely. It would only lead to trouble.

I stare intently at Sendai-san. The corners of her mouth are turned up. She's smiling, and you could say she’s in a great mood. I have a bad feeling about this.

"The skirt I want to buy is for Miyagi to wear," she says in a voice that seems to have three musical notes attached onto the end.

"I'll buy my own skirt, so it's fine."

"Whether I buy it or you buy it, at least ask me about which skirt i want to buy."

"I won't ask, because it's definitely a skirt I don’t want to wear."

I state firmly, turning my back on Sendai-san. But without knowing

where to go, my legs can't move.

"Miyagi."

Sendai-san calls my name. When I didn't turn around, she comes to stand beside me. I glance at her.

Anywhere you want to go with me. You decide, Miyagi.

Sendai-san's words are the reason for today. If I think about how it started, I should have been the one to choose where we went. But I cheated a bit, deciding on something I wanted to do with Sendai-san instead of a place to visit, leaving our actual destination up to her.

I did that so Sendai-san could have fun, but considering that I had cheated, I had decided to quietly go along with whatever she wanted to do today.

But, but, but...

I glance at the shopping bag containing the skirt she just bought.

"I won't buy something you absolutely don’t want to wear, so just listen to what I have to say," Sendai-san's voice reaches me, and I reluctantly answer.

"If just listening is enough... Which skirt is it?"

"The one with a slit."

She answers without hesitation, and I immediately shoot back, "Absolutely not."

"If the slit is more modest than the one you tried on earlier, would that be okay?"

"That’s not the point here."

"Then I'll wear it, so just come with me to buy it."

Saying it as if it’s nothing, Sendai-san grabs my arm and starts walking. I let myself get dragged along, airing my complaints along the way.

"You're kidding, right?"

"I'm serious."

"I definitely think that's a lie."

"Today is the day to choose clothes for Miyagi, after all."

Sendai-san's bright voice rings back, and she leads me to the shop that had the skirt with a slit. She looks at the skirt I tried on earlier and picks a new one. I stand a further away, keeping her in my view.

I can’t fathom what could be fun about choosing clothes for me, but she seems to be having a great time.

"Miyagi, come here for a second."

Her buoyant voice reaches me, and when I approach her side, she presents a skirt similar to the slit skirt I had tried on earlier.

"I think it suits you."

Pressing the skirt against my body, Sendai-san says, "Want to try it on?" to which I reply, "No, I don’t."

"I see. Well, since I just bought the other skirt, let's leave it at that and go look at something else."

With a voice as light as a feather, Sendai-san returns the skirt to where it was.

"Are you sure?"

"Miyagi, did you like that skirt?"

"Not really."

"Then let's go. I told you, I wouldn’t make you buy something you don’t want to wear."

Sendai-san smiles warmly.

This is unfair.

There's no way I can ignore such kind words. After cheating a bit by shifting from deciding a place to visit to deciding what we were going to do, if I ignore Sendai-san's kindness, I'd feel like an awful person.

"...I'll go buy it."

Words I didn't need to say slip out of my mouth.

"Eh?"

"Stay here, Sendai-san."

I pick up the skirt Sendai-san had put back.

It had a modest slit, so I had no intention of trying it on, but it seemed to be about the same size as the skirt I had worn earlier.

"Miyagi?"

"I don't want you getting lost, so don't move from that spot."

Leaving the wide-eyed Sendai-san, I head to the register.

This is really exasperating.

If Sendai-san were a bit more pushy, I'd definitely have refused and wouldn't end up buying this skirt. But since she was strangely considerate, I ended up buying a skirt I didn't need to buy.

I pay for the skirt and return to Sendai-san.

"I bought it. Where are we going next?"

"I'll pay for it."

"It's fine, I can pay for my own things. Sendai-san, you decide where we go next."

"Okay. Let's go out for now."

Without deciding on our next destination, we leave the shop.

One step, two steps.

As we walk slowly, Sendai-san remarks, "Even though you didn't try it on, I think it'll suit you," followed by, "Since it's a special occasion, let me choose some shoes to match."

"Shoes aren't clothing."

"It's cuter if the shoes match too."

"I didn't plan on spending that much money."

"…What about that money?"

The five thousand yen she had saved up, which I had given to Sendai-san back when we were in high school.

I immediately knew that's what she meant by "that money," so I tell her, "We don't have to use it."

"Right. Well, I'll give up on it for today. But let me choose shoes for you someday."

"No way. But I like seeing you looking so happy like today, Sendai-san."

"Eh?"

"Sendai-san, you should stop saying 'eh' so easily."

"…I do agree with that."

Sendai-san sounded unusually troubled and let out a sigh.

The word 'beautiful' suits her better than 'cute,' but in a situation like this, I think 'cute' is the perfect word.

"Sendai-san. Are we still picking clothes?"

Now that I've bought the skirt and seen the joyful smile on Sendai-san's face.

You could say today's goal has been met.

However, Sunday has just begun.

"Let's pick out something for the top. …But first, aren't you hungry?"

Sendai-san says, smiling warmly. I place a hand on my stomach. Though it doesn't growl, it feels as flat as a pancake.

"Yeah, I'm hungry."

"Then, let's go eat something delicious together."

With that, Sendai-san smiles again.

About Sendai-san (II)

Part 396

We eat a lot of bread. We often have toast for breakfast. When we go out, we sometimes have French toast or pancakes.

However, the type of bread on the table at the French cafe where Sendai-san confidently guided me is unlike anything I've had before.

It was a hot sandwich covered with slightly charred cheese. Flipping the bread back, I could see ham inside.

"Miyagi, are you sure you're okay with a croque-monsieur?"

Hearing Sendai-san's voice from across the table, I shift my gaze from the bread to her.

"You were the one who recommended it, Sendai-san."

I ordered the same croque-monsieur as Sendai-san, trusting her claim that it's delicious. It's a bit too late for her to ask "Are you sure you're okay it?" now.

"That's true, but it's not something you usually eat."

"I was just looking at it because I've never had it before."

Something I've seen but never eaten— that's the croque-monsieur. I feel like this was the first time I was even consciously aware of its formal name, so I can't help but stare.

"Eat it before it gets cold. It's delicious."

I don't dislike cheese, nor do I dislike ham. I certainly don't dislike bread. Since it's a combination of things I find delicious, I can somewhat imagine the flavor.

"I'm going to eat now."

I briefly say as much and when I add "Let's eat," my voice perfectly

aligns with Sendai-san's. Watching her smile warmly, I cut into the croque-monsieur with a knife. The generous amount cheese melts and oozes, releasing a pleasant aroma. The knife slices through the ham, and the soft bread is easily cut through.

From the cut, a hint of white sauce peeks out. I take a bite. It's delightfully crispy, fluffy, and delicious. The cheese and sauce blend in my mouth, complementing the bread and ham perfectly.

I continue cutting up the croque-monsieur with a fork and knife, taking bites in between. A salad and orange juice are also on the table, which I occasionally eat and drink.

"Miyagi, is it good?"

"It's delicious."

I reply quickly and glance at Sendai-san, noting that her croque-monsieur remained largely untouched.

"Are you not going to eat?"

When I inquire, her smile broadens slightly as she cuts a piece from her own croque-monsieur.

"Miyagi, do you want to eat this?"

She offers me a piece speared on her fork. Before I can reply, she says, "Open wide." I quickly retort with, "No need. It's delicious, so you should eat it, Sendai-san."

"I see. That's too bad."

Sendai-san takes a bite of the croque-monsieur herself, declaring, "It's delicious." I take a bite of mine in sync.

It is genuinely delicious. However, making it at home seems like it would be a hassle.

While I don't think assembling ham between toasted bread and putting cheese on top is difficult, making the white sauce seems troublesome.

"What are you thinking about, Miyagi?"

Sendai-san pauses her eating and looks at me.

"I'm just thinking it's delicious."

"Do you want me to make it for you sometime?"

"Can you make it?"

"If I look up a recipe, I think it’s doable."

With that, Sendai-san takes another bite of her croque-monsieur and adds, "But I think the one at the cafe is better, so we should come back and eat it together again."

“...I’ll think about it.”

I'm sure whatever Sendai-san makes would be delicious, but I also want to taste this cafe's croque-monsieur again.

Yet, if we come here again, I have a sneaking suspicion that she'll suggest looking at clothes and it would end up with me having to try things on.

I cut another piece of the croque-monsieur and take a bite. The rich cheese and creamy sauce are delicious.

I'm reluctant to try things on repeatedly like I did today, but I'm glad I went out with Sendai-san. I discovered another delicious thing.

I glance at Sendai-san as she's eating her croque-monsieur. Her smile has grown even wider.

"Sendai-san, do you like croque-monsieur that much?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you’re smiling so much."

"I'm smiling because you’re smiling, Miyagi."

Her unexpected words prompt an immediate retort from me, "I am not."

"Maybe I might have exaggerated. 'I'm smiling because Miyagi is eating so enthusiastically' is more accurate."

Sendai-san says this cheerfully.

"…That's annoying."

I mutter, and she responds with another infuriating remark, "Miyagi, you're cute," prompting me to tap her shoe with mine under the table.

"I was just telling the truth."

"Sendai-san, shut up."

I finish off the croque-monsieur on my plate and move onto the salad. Across from me, Sendai-san continues to happily munch on her croque-monsieur.

Eventually, I finished my salad, as well as my orange juice. Sendai-san's plate is empty too, and she orders two lemon tarts.

In the silence that follows, I finally voice a question that's been lingering in my mind.

"Sendai-san. Why did you choose this place to pick out clothes today? Aren't there other buildings with lots of shops?"

"Did you not want to?"

"It's not that I dislike it… I'm just curious why you chose this place."

I sip some water to cover my uncertainty.

This is the place where we came to choose clothes for Maika.

It makes sense for Sendai-san to find it easier to pick clothes here given we came here before. But there are countless clothing stores out there, so I can't help thinking that it didn't have to be here.

Even now, after finding out that the croque-monsieur at this cafe is delicious, that feeling still lingers in my heart.

"Hmm, let's see."

Sendai-san touches her necklace, looking at me. After thinking for a bit, she speaks slowly.

"Because there were a lot of clothes I wanted to see you wear back then. And... maybe because you and Utsunomiya were getting along when we were picking clothes for her."

"Because we were getting along? What do you mean?"

I hear Sendai-san clearly, and her words register clearly in my head. Still, I can't figure out what my closeness with Maika has to do with choosing this place for my clothes today.

“It’s a good thing that you get along with Utsunomiya, and of course it makes sense that she’d come to mind when you think about picking out clothes together.
But when you talk about choosing clothes here, I just… want you to think of me first.”

Sendai-san says this quietly, sipping some water, and adds, "I wonder if the lemon tarts are ready yet."

"…Does it matter who I think of first?"

As I say this in a voice neither loud nor quiet, the lemon tart was brought out, bringing the conversation to a halt We weren't done talking, yet it feels inappropriate to continue. So, we finish the lemon tarts without a crumb left and leave the cafe.

"What about the tops? If you're tired, we can head home."

As we stroll without a particular destination, Sendai-san says this.

"I'm not tired."

Even though I answered without hesitation, I was met with a doubting "Really?" from Sendai-san, prompting me to reaffirm with a firm "Really."

Yet, for some reason, Sendai-san doesn't believe me. Watching me closely, she softly adds, "You don't have to push yourself."

"Sendai-san, you're persistent."

I lightly nudge her arm.

"…I just don’t want to make you push yourself like at the festival."

Her voice betrays a hint of concern, and I recall the summer festival we attended in yukata.

At that time, I ended up with blisters from the unfamiliar geta sandals.

Apparently, she hasn't forgotten about that incident. Therefore, I attempt to explain my feelings to Sendai-san in simpler terms.

"If it doesn't involve a ton of trying things on like with the skirts, I want you you to help choose my tops too."

"Got it."

Sendai-san smiles and says, "Then let's go to the shop I have in mind."

Her voice is lively. She takes me around to several shops.

Just two fittings. I ended up buying a single, reasonably priced knit top. I hold the bags with the skirts in my hand, while Sendai-san snatches the bag with the top, insisting on carrying it.

As the evening descends, and with our shopping finished, we head home. Although October is still clinging onto the remnants of summer, autumn is unmistakably here, making it cooler than last month. We take the train, disembark, and stop by a convenience store. After buying some boxed dinners and pudding, we walk home along a path devoid of the usual appearance of the stray calico cat.

Sendai-san comments about how the skirt suited me well and how she wished I’d tried on more. As we eat our boxed meals, she talks about these trivial things, prompting me to lightly kick her under the table.

Quickly finishing our meal, we clean up.

While I could head straight to my room, Sendai-san tugs my arm,

and we go into her room. When I sit with my back against her bed, she murmurs from beside me, “Thanks for today.”

“Thanks to you too.”

I mumble, to which Sendai-san responds with a smile, “I want to pick out clothes for Miyagi again."

"Sendai-san, you really love picking out clothes, don't you? You looked like you were having so much fun today."

"Yeah. It was fun enough that I want to choose a lifetime’s worth of clothes for you."

“No need to choose that many.”

“Let me keep picking them in the future.”

“No. It's tiring.”

"You’re stingy, Miyagi."

"Sendai-san, you're just too greedy."

I lightly tap her knee, studying her intently.

Today, Sendai-san has been in a good mood the entire day. Exceptionally good.

She's rarely in a bad mood, but today she’s been particularly cheerful.

"…Sendai-san, is there anything else you like?"

I look into her eyes and ask.

"Anything else?"

"I told you before, didn't I? To tell me if you find anything you like or dislike. Did you forget?"

I told her once before that I wanted her to inform me about such things, to report everything properly. But she still hasn’t clearly told me about her likes and dislikes.

As for the other request I made, "Get along with Mio-san," I'm irritated, but she's mostly fulfilled it. That's why I'm more concerned about her reluctance to share her likes and dislikes with me.

"I remember. Clearly."

Her voice is gentle.

"Then tell me what you like besides picking out clothes. Or tell me if you've found something you dislike."

"Something other than picking out clothes for Miyagi? I like Miyagi wearing the clothes I picked out. So, how about wearing the clothes we bought today right now?"

The conversation shifts suddenly, and I grab the platypus tissue box cover from the floor, pressing it against Sendai-san.

"I'll wear them to the movies, so there's no need to wear them today."

"I want to see you wear it today too, not just to the movies."

Sendai-san says something ridiculous, setting the platypus back on the floor.

"I'm not wearing them."

"Then, let me keep picking out clothes for you, Miyagi. All your clothes, even the ones you wear to university."

With that, Sendai-san firmly grips my hand.

Chapter 138

Miyagi Shiori (I)

(Sendai PoV)
Part 397

"...No."

The curt response came after I requested to pick out all of her clothes, even for going to university, and I tightened my grip on Miyagi's hand.

"I figured you'd say that."

I expected Miyagi to say, "No."

I find this side of Miyagi incredibly cute.

Whether she was reluctantly trying skirts on or happily eating a croque-monsieur, she was equally cute, making me want to hold her close.

“That’s not what we were talking about. I asked you to tell me what you like or dislike.”

“I told you — I like it when you wear the clothes I pick out for you”

“And what else?”

As she said this, Miyagi tried to pull away the hand entwined with mine, so I leaned in, pressing my shoulder against hers.

Hand in hand.
Shoulder to shoulder.

With each additional point of contact, my heart pounded louder.

"Let's see... there might not be anything I can say right now."

“You don’t need to force yourself. Just let me know when you find something.”

“I will. But Miyagi, you have to tell me too.”

“Tell you what?”

"Why don't you want me to choose everything you wear?"

"It’s not that I don't want you to... It’s just impossible for you to choose everything."

Miyagi mumbled, lowering her gaze to the floor.

“Why?”

"If that happened, I wouldn't be able to wear anything without you around, Sendai-san."

“Maybe a naked Miyagi would be good too.”

“Are you stupid?”

“If that’s the case, you'd just wait here for me, not wearing anything and not going anywhere, right?"

“You’re such a pervert, Sendai-san. We’re not talking about that. Besides, if anyone should be in this room without wearing anything, it’s you. You like taking your clothes off, don’t you, Sendai-san?”

“If it means I could be with Miyagi forever, I wouldn’t mind.”

“Sendai-san, you always say weird things. Don’t talk about impossible things like that.”

Her small voice pushed away my words. In moments like these, Miyagi is realistic and doesn’t dream. She only focuses on what can be achieved in this world.

"...Miyagi, do you not want to be with me forever?"

My desires spill out towards Miyagi, who clings to reality,

"That's impossible."

"If it weren't impossible, would you want to stay with me?"

I asked this with a tone neither strong nor weak, looking at Miyagi. Yet, her eyes didn't meet mine, nor did she reply. I tugged on the hand I was holding, redirecting her gaze toward me.

She remained silent.
So, I spoke.

“I will always be by your side, Miyagi.”

I leaned my shoulder against hers, pressing close.

“That's a lie.”

I heard a voice that I couldn't distinguish as genuine or false, and I replied, “It's not a lie.”

I belong only to Miyagi.
For me not to be by her side is impossible.

Simultaneously, a part of me wants to claim Miyagi as mine alone, hoping she would say, “I will always be by your side, Sendai-san”.

I used to be satisfied with just belonging solely to Miyagi, but now, it's no longer enough.

“...That's impossible.”

Miyagi, who didn't believe me, mumbled, and I immediately denied it.

“It's not impossible.”

“Even though you have university and a part-time job? Can you ignore all that and still always stay by my side?”

Not too long ago, Miyagi asked me something similar. I couldn't give an immediate answer then, and I couldn't today either.

Miyagi's words aren't wrong.
But they aren't entirely right either.

I believe that living means coexisting with the impossible.

Even if I declare that we'll be together all the time, clinging to each other for 24 hours a day is impossible. For a person to live a human life, they have to go to school or work, and even if we were at the same school or workplace, there would definitely be moments when we were apart.

Therefore, it’s not possible to be “always” by Miyagi’s side.

Everyone knows such a thing is impossible.

So, people must acknowledge what can’t be done and overlap it with what can be done, finding a way to live.

“Even if I can't be right next to you, I'll still always by your side, Miyagi.”

Even if I can't be beside her physically, my heart can remain by her side.

“That’s enough already. After graduation, our room-sharing agreement ends.”

Miyagi spoke flatly, pushing my shoulder away.
Our distance, once nonexistent, became the length of a platypus tissue holder, and a gap formed between us.

When I said "by your side," I didn't mean literally being right next to her without leaving for twenty-four hours a day. I meant maximizing the time we could spend together and making that a reality. It also meant filling the time we couldn't be next to each other with our feelings instead. Miyagi should know that, yet she still keeps trying to stray off the main path.

“Miyagi, you said I could celebrate your birthday forever, didn’t you? Was that a lie?”

"It’s not a lie. Even if we don’t house-share, we can still celebrate birthdays together, like you said, Sendai-san."

Miyagi tried to escape my words like a frightened stray cat. Though I’ve seen her back away countless times, I don't want to see it today.

So, wanting every part of Miyagi to be mine, I spoke the words to claim her.

“Even if we didn’t live together, we could still celebrate birthdays. But let's keep sharing a room—and celebrate them that way. Miyagi, always celebrate my birthday right by my side. Because I’ll always celebrate yours right by yours.”

"Why? That isn’t the promise. The room-sharing is only until graduation, right?"

“Yes, but we can make a new promise.”

There are feelings hidden within Miyagi that she won't show me, and they are carefully tucked away. While I don’t intend to expose them, I want to grasp at least a piece, to know her more, to have her become only mine.

But if I'm to touch even a little of that carefully kept secret, I must offer up something that I have similarly locked away deep inside me.

“Miyagi, don’t run away and listen to what I'm about to say. Although I'll say it countless times after today, this is the first time I’m saying it to you.”

“...No.”

Miyagi leaves behind a faint refusal, distancing herself from me. The distance between us is now wide enough for three platypus tissue holders, and I grip her hand even tighter.

“Let me go, Sendai-san.”

Miyagi said without looking at me. I touched her ear, stroking her plumeria earring.

"Listen," I whispered softly and inhaled.

Then I exhaled.
Breathed in again.

Meeting Miyagi's gaze, I conveyed what needed to be said.

“Sendai Hazuki loves Miyagi Shiori. I don't need anything else.”

Miyagi stared at me, as if she had forgot how to breathe.
She continued to watch, without changing her expression.

“Miyagi. I’ve always wanted to tell you what I love, for a long time now. — What I’ve loved since long ago is you, Miyagi. That's why I want to always be by your side, and why I've decided to always celebrate your birthday right next to you. Even when we're apart, I still want to be close to you. I want us to always be together. That’s how much I love you, Miyagi. I want you to love me just as much— and I want us to keep living together, forever and always.”

Releasing what has been locked inside my heart for so long, I touched Miyagi’s cheek.

She remained motionless.
Staring at me as if she forgot how to blink.

If left unsaid, we could have continued our lukewarm, ambiguous relationship. I could've remained just “the person living in something important to Miyagi.”

But that wasn't enough for me anymore.

Even if the lukewarm waters of our relationship turned into ice cold waters, I yearned to make Miyagi mine alone.

Do I regret it?

I don't know.

My heart’s pounding is deafening.
My throat is parched and sore.
The weight of silence bears heavily on my shoulders.
I both want and don’t want her to say something.

Miyagi blinked.
Her lips parted, and a hoarse voice emerged.

“That's—”

Instinctively, I moved.
My lips stole away Miyagi’s words.

I swallowed the rest of what she was going to say and pulled away.

“Don’t give me an answer now. If you do, you’ll absolutely say that's impossible and that you don’t love me. So for now, hold off on giving an answer.”

I said all this in one breath and inhaled again.
My throat still felt parched as if had been burnt, making it painfully dry.

“...How long should I keep it on hold?”

With an expressionless voice, Miyagi pulled her hand away from mine.

“Until your university graduation ceremony. When the day comes, you’ll confess to me.”

“Why am I the one who has to confess?”

She asked in a voice neither low nor high, looking at me with discontent.

“Because I’ve decided that on graduation day, I’ll make you say you love me.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I’ll tell you ‘I love you’ over and over from now on, so that won't happen. Even if you say you don’t want to hear it, I’ll keep saying it.”

“There's no need for that.”

Miyagi said bluntly and began to pull away.
So, I closed the distance she created and then moved even closer.

“Hey, Miyagi. Today, tomorrow, the day after— I will always love you.”

I whispered softly in her ear and kissed her dissatisfied lips.

Miyagi Shiori (II)

Part 398

The usual morning.
The usual me.
The usual—

“Good morning.”

It still feels different from yesterday.

Good morning.
Good morning.
Good morning.
Good morning.
Good morning.

I repeat it over and over again.
Just one emotion has transformed what should have been an ordinary morning, and no matter how many times I practice, I can’t seem to say “good morning” properly.

I stand up from the bed I had been sitting on and touch the four-leaf clover at my chest.
I squeeze my hand tightly, then slowly open it.

The feeling I’ve nurtured deep inside my heart and kept locked away is, when said aloud, just three words long. But it’s something that will surely change both Miyagi and me, and that’s why I kept thinking I shouldn’t say it.

Yet last night, I said those words.

— I love you.

That emotions I released definitely reached Miyagi, and I was unable to sleep all night.

“Good morning.”

It feels like my voice is trembling, or hoarse.

What I could easily do yesterday, are no longer possible to do today.
If I hadn't said "I love you," I'm sure I could've had the same morning as always.
But even if I could go back to yesterday morning, I would still do the same thing.

Yesterday, when I went out with Miyagi, was a really fun day.

It was a day when I realized that Miyagi had tried her best to make it into one I could truly enjoy, all for my sake, and that made my feelings even stronger—so strong I couldn't suppress the desire to make Miyagi mine alone.

Though, I do think maybe I should have respected Miyagi's feelings a bit more.
I had always been walking slowly so as not to leave her behind, but I ended up moving not one, but ten, or maybe even twenty steps ahead.

I'm scared of what's on the other side of the door.

It's already time to start preparing breakfast, but Miyagi probably isn't in the shared space. She must certainly be in her room, but somehow it feels like she isn't.

I breathe in, then out.

I haven't done my makeup yet, but I have changed clothes.

My hair is in its usual half-up style, and I'm wearing both the necklace and earrings Miyagi gave me.

It's okay.

I'm a different person from the me of yesterday morning, but I'm also still the same me as always.

I open the door and step into the shared space.
Miyagi isn't there.

I go to the entrance and check the shoes.
Miyagi's are there.

I walk to the door of her room.
I take a breath, then exhale

I'm about to knock on the door, but my hand stops.

The moment this door opens, Miyagi might run away from me. I know she's behind this door, and yet I can't help but think that the moment she sees my face, she'll start running, burst out the front door, and disappear.

Love is irrational.

It tosses both yourself and the other person around, never going the way you want.

Confessing my love isn't the end—it's only the beginning of a long road ahead.
But that road is the time it'll take to make Miyagi tell me she loves me too, and that's time I need.

I steel myself and knock.
Once, twice.
There's no response from Miyagi.
The door doesn't open.

I knock again and call, "Miyagi."

After a brief pause, I hear Miyagi's voice: "Don't worry, I'm here," and then the door opens.

"...Morning."
Miyagi mutters, not looking at me.

"Good morning."
I answer cheerfully and tell her, "Let's eat. I'll start making breakfast now."

"I'll help you."

I hear her soft voice, but Miyagi doesn't step out of her room.

Normally, I would grab her hand and say, "Come on, get out of your room," but today, I hesitate to reach for her hand.

Miyagi looks at me.

I gather my courage and extend my hand, but Miyagi takes a step back.

“It’s okay. All I did yesterday was tell you that I love you. Nothing’s changed from before.”

That’s a lie.
Today isn’t the same as yesterday.
But I tell that lie because I want Miyagi to act normal.

“It’s not okay... it's impossible for things to stay the same.”
“It’s okay.”

I reach out and touch Miyagi with my still-outstretched hand.
Her body flinches slightly, but she doesn’t run away.
The warmth of her body remains connected to mine.

“I just want to tell you that I love you, Miyagi. You don’t have to say anything.”
Smiling softly, I touch Miyagi’s plumeria earring.

Then I bring my lips to hers.